PlayStation 3 · PlayStation Portable · PlayStation Network · PlayStation 2

PlayStation® Official Magazine

MAY 2010

PlayStation - The Official Magazine Issue 32 (May 2010)

MIDDLE-EARTH EXCLUSIVE!

LORD OF THE RINGS

War in the North

Splatterhouse, Dead Rising 2 will chop your #%&* off!

SUPER REVIEWS

Super Street Fighter IV
Resonance of Fate
Just Cause 2

MGS GOES RPG?

Build a better Snake in Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker

Future
MEDIA WITH PASSION

Don't judge a game by its cover just because we did. p.52

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kalipa
kalipa
the best of E3
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BEST RACING GAME
EVERYONE 10+ ™
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Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
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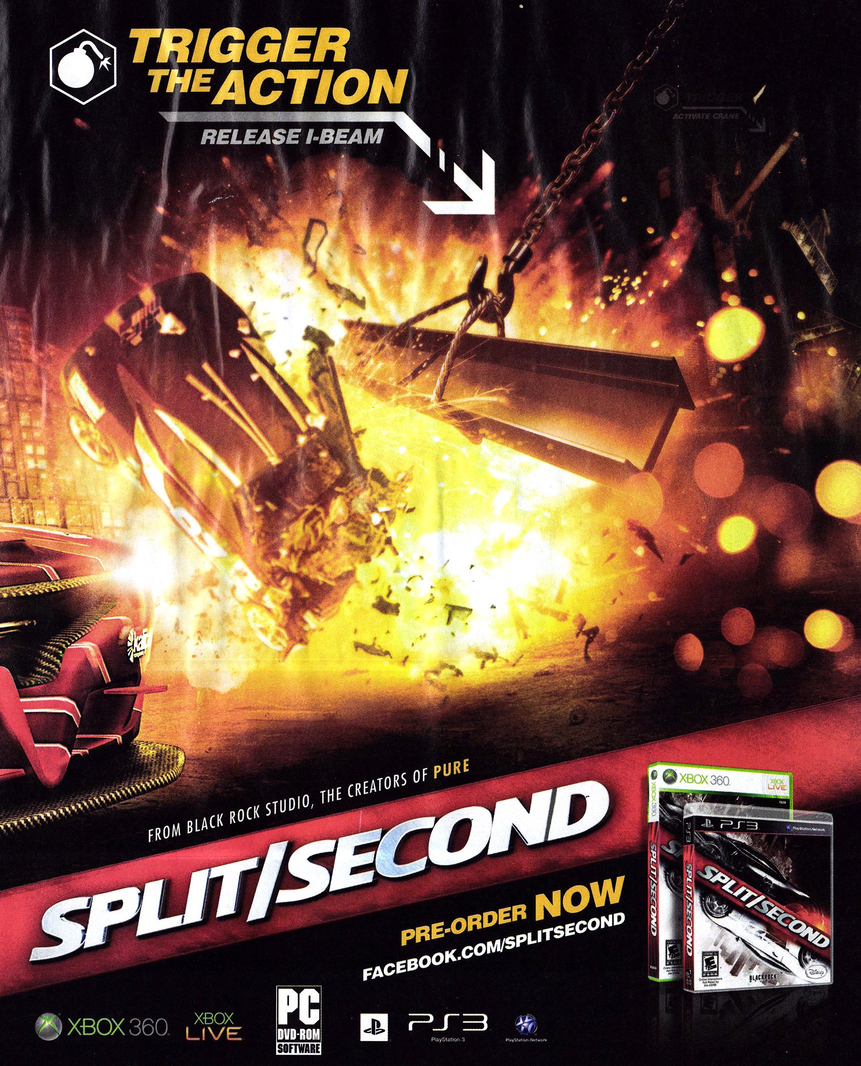
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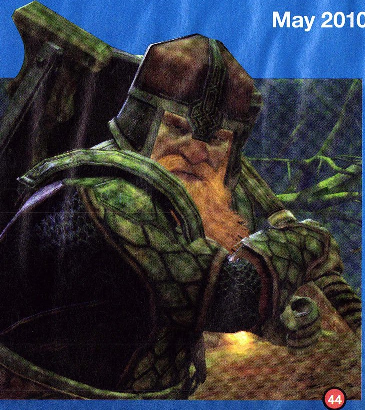

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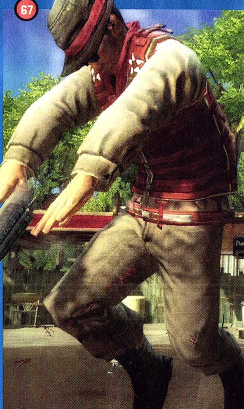

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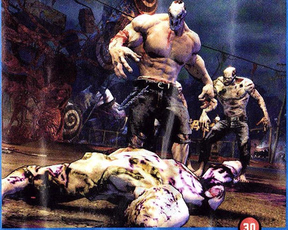

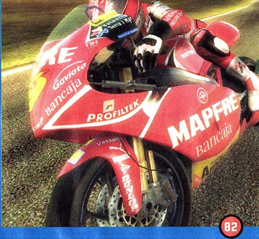

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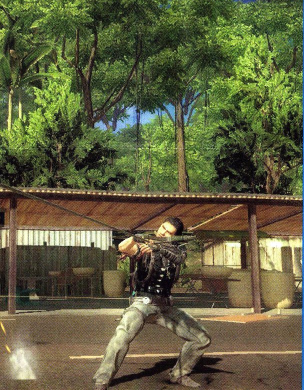

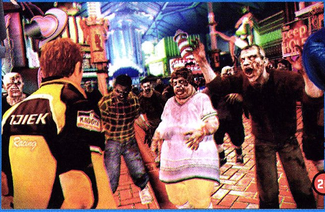

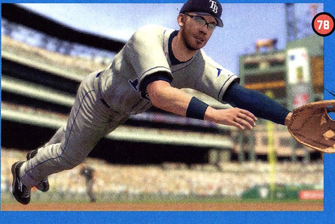

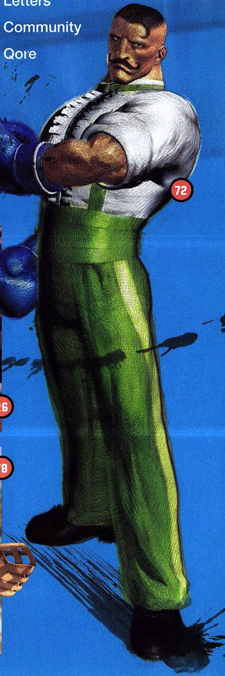

A Long-Expected Party

My wife has a word for it: antisocial. And though I try to deny it, I have to admit that she's right.

Oh sure, I can hide behind concepts like "taste" or "discernment." I am, after all, a finely coifed, exceedingly elegant dandy of a chap who associates only with the most upper of the crust. Or so, on my very best days, I can convince myself.

But she's right. I mean, it's not that I don't like other people. I just don't enjoy being *around* other people, in social settings, where I might have to, y'know, socialize.

Which is why, up until recently, I've been primarily a solo gamer. Part of this stems from the fact that my favorite genres—RPGs, action-adventures, platformers, story-driven shooters—are built around solo play. Granted, *Uncharted 2* has an online component, and *BioShock 2* now comes with multiplayer, but that's secondary to their main appeal: a crafted adventure I can enjoy by myself.

That's why I'm so excited about this month's cover star. *War in the North* might be just the thing to get me back online, buddying up with co-workers and strangers alike, working side by side to hit very big things until they fall down. Yes, there've been other co-op focused online experiences—I still stop by *Borderlands'* Pandora every now and then—but the right license, with the right storyline wrapped around it, can turn a quick excursion into a dream destination.

So enjoy our world-exclusive reveal of *The Lord of the Rings: War in the North*. And start figuring out who you're gonna play—because I call Dwarf and I get to be the scout!

GARY

Gary Steinman | Editor in Chief
www.twitter.com/TinyManRages

The Team

GARY STEINMAN
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Today it hailed. Then there was a rainbow. It was a day like no other, and yet the day seemed oddly familiar. It was the end of this deadline but the beginning of the next deadline. Weclome to Gary's world.

NOW PLAYING: *God of War III, Fat Princess, Final Fantasy XIII*

GREG ORLANDO
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Remember when you said Greg Orlando was really just four cats and a circus mime in a burlap sack and people told you to stop inhaling hot tar fumes? You should probably listen to those people.

NOW PLAYING: *Yakuza 3, God of War III, Splatterhouse*

KEN BOUSQUET
ART DIRECTOR

Ken is responsible for, in layman's terms, the good stuff you hold in your hands. Oh, sure, he lets the others pitch in—*when it suits him.* You will read this magazine and then send Ken a nice thank-you note. It's only polite.

NOW PLAYING: *2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa, God of War III*

ROGER BURCHILL
MANAGING EDITOR

Opinions vary, that's the nature of reviews, but a certain *Yakuza 3* review has Roger's brain ready to explode. Yes, *someone's* freakishly long thumbs are going to look especially abnormal on hands missing pinkies.

NOW PLAYING: *Just Cause 2, Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing, DOA: Paradise*

SCOTT BUTTERWORTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Quarter-circle light punch. Back quarter-circle heavy kick. Light kick plus light punch. Quarter-circle, quarter-circle heavy punch. Up, right, heavy punch, mid punch, quarter-circle mid punch. Victory.

NOW PLAYING: *Super Street Fighter IV, God of War III, Heavy Rain*

THE DAVID MURPHY
EDITORIAL INTERN

Composed of seven types of candy and, also, naked aggression, David showed great determination when his bagel got stuck in a toaster. His heroism under fire in this 17-hour crisis is an inspiration to everyone.

NOW PLAYING: *Persona 4, Super Street Fighter IV, Rez*

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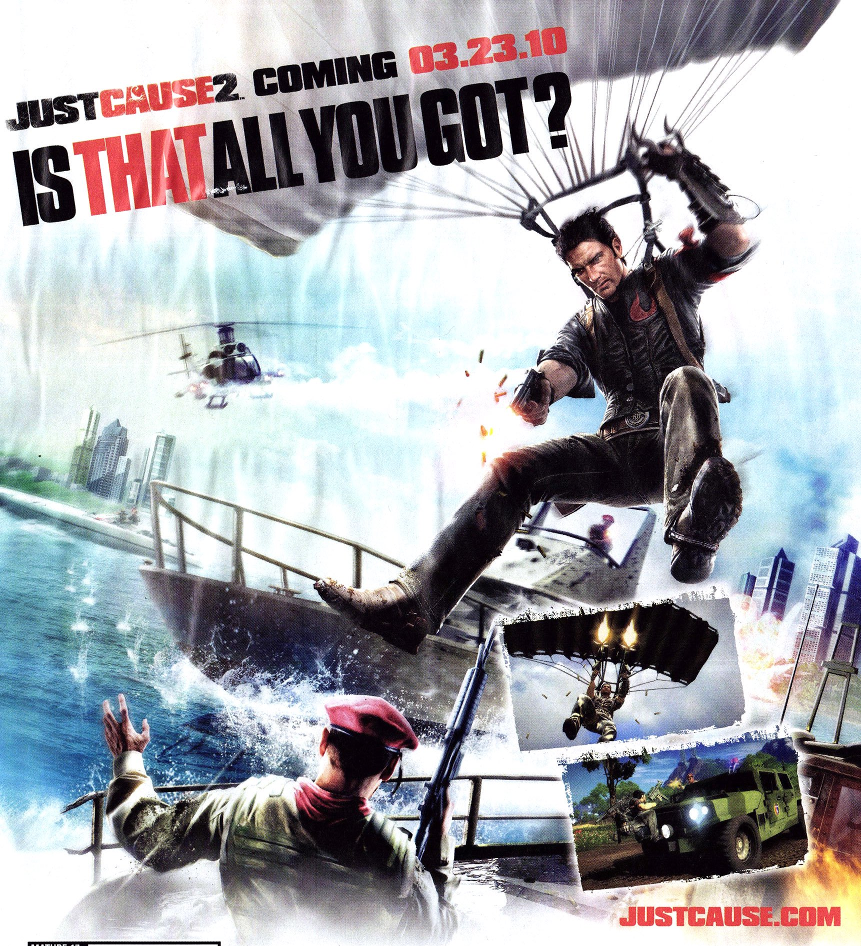

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Blood
Drug Reference
Language
Sexual Themes
Violence

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THE TEN

Stories that everyone's talking about

Split Personalities
Four Spider-Men are better than one
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Getting Used
"Hey buddy, can you spare 10 bucks?"
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Winning Formula?
Proof that race cars *can* turn right
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Call of Duty will never die, just multiply
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Being Difficult
Gary and Greg give each other a hard time
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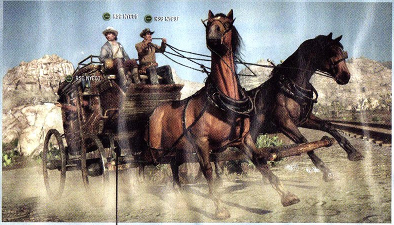


The lobby is like a limit-free version of *GTA IV's* free roam mode set against a brilliantly atmospheric Wild West backdrop.

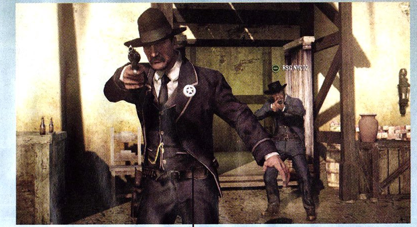
1 Red Dead Extension

Quick draws, gold rushes, and the greatest multiplayer lobby in the history of videogames

Seriously, who'd have ever thought that something as dry as a game lobby could be exciting? Leave it to Rockstar to prove us all wrong. The *Grand Theft Auto* developer recently unveiled the oft rumored, but never confirmed, multiplayer portion of its next open-world saga, *Red Dead Redemption*—and the lobby might be the game's most exciting element. Why? Because it's practically a Wild West MMORPG.

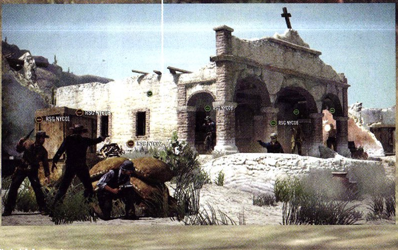
The lobby is a fully playable version of the *entire* game world that's populated with both random CPU characters and live gamers—though the numbers will never approach *World of Warcraft* levels. In our visit, we created a "posse" with friends and roamed freely about the map, engaging in activities from hunting wild animals to hunting other gamers. There are even ad hoc missions (like besieging a desert ranch filled with bandits) that feel an awful lot like raids.

Whether running from the sheriff or shooting wildlife in the desert, everything we do can net us experience points, which are used to customize our appearance and upgrade our horse, weapons, and "title." There are also new multiplayer modes to unlock, like the standard 16-player deathmatch and a team-based "capture the bag" (both of which start with a spectacular face-to-face quick-draw duel). But, to be honest, we didn't spend all that much time with those other modes, because we couldn't pry ourselves away from the lobby!



Once we joined a party—er, "posse"—we were able to maintain constant communication with teammates.

Anyone can travel to any point on the map (including building interiors), regardless of the locations of other lobby visitors.

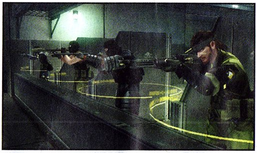

RSG NYC01
RSG NYC03
RSG NYC02
RSG NYC05

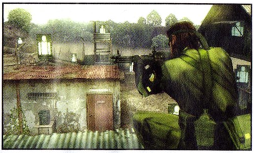
2 MGS Goes RPG

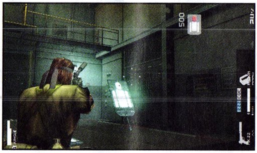
Build a better Snake in *Peace Walker*

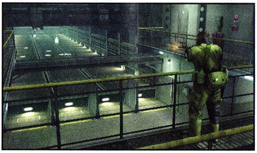
That's right, *the Metal Gear Solid* franchise—which, despite its uncontestable status as a trailblazing series, is still susceptible to the pervasive trends that influence modern game design—has finally succumbed to the lurid temptations of the RPG. (And no, we're not just talking about 40-minute cutscenes.) Konami recently revealed exclusively to PTOM that *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* features a variety of shooting ranges where we can not only hone our personal gaming proficiency but also upgrade Snake's skills with each individual weapon.

If we take the time to slaughter a few cardboard bad guys with, say, Snake's .45, we'll see improvements in his ability to wield that weapon in the rest of the game. Does that mean faster reload times or improved accuracy? Konami wouldn't specify. But this does mark the first time the *Metal Gear* franchise has incorporated any kind of skill progression (unless you count those pull-ups in *Sons of Liberty*...which we don't). Combined with the game's two other big firsts—the ability to select from among several different loudouts, and online co-op—it's looking like we'll experience a whole new *Metal Gear* when *Peace Walker* hits PSP this May.









THE LOWDOWN ON SNAKE'S LOADOUTS

Stun Rod An electric baton that knocks out enemies—if you can get close enough.

MK22 Hit guards in the head with this standard-issue tranquilizer gun to drop them instantly.

VZ61 The Scorpion submachinegun was developed in the '50s and is a popular Special Forces weapon.

M16A1 The M4 of its day, the M16A1 is a refined version of the M16 with an improved firing mechanism, barrel, and muzzle.

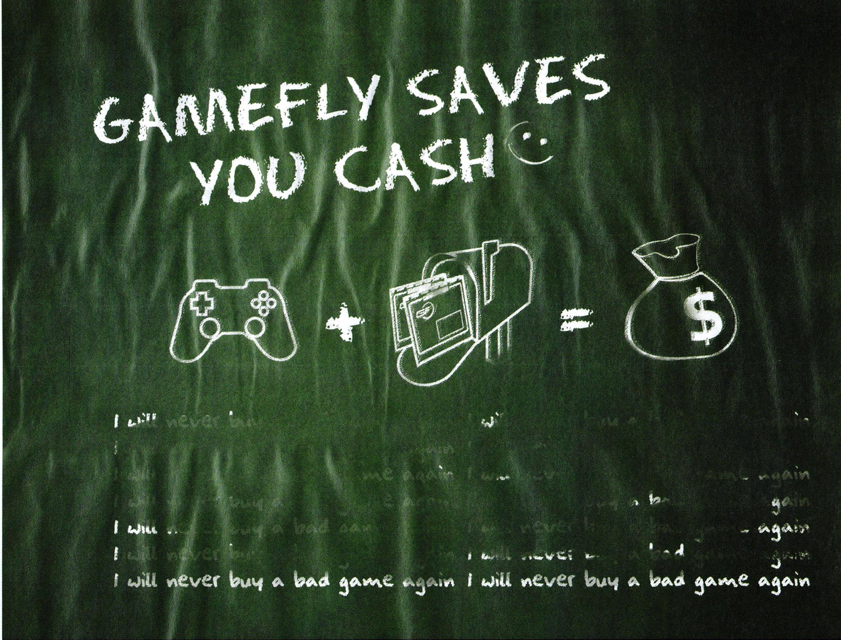
M60 A belt-fed heavy machine gun best suited for taking on large numbers and powerful targets. Not ideal for stealth.

M1911A1 An upgraded model of the M1911 Colt .45 handgun, with a shorter trigger, better grip, and widened sight.

Grenade The inside of the M67 fragmentation grenade case is scored into a lattice that encourages it to break on detonation, throwing out lethal metal pieces.

Stun Grenade This party favorite will incapacitate nearby enemies for vital seconds, but you risk alerting everyone else for miles.

Cardboard Box *Peace Walker* features a variety of cardboard boxes. We're not sure what their properties are, but multiple co-op players can occupy the same box.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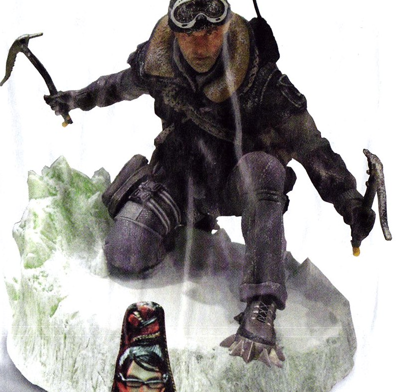
3 "It" Figures

PlayStation toys aplenty

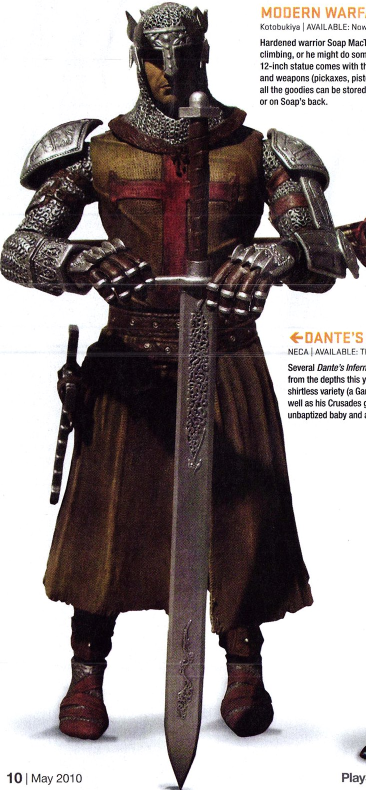
Action-heavy and ultra-cool, these are the hottest PlayStation-themed statuettes and toys around. Gaze now at the wondrous goodies soon to be decimating your wallet while decorating your homes and office cubicles.



MODERN WARFARE 2→

Kotobukiya | AVAILABLE: Now

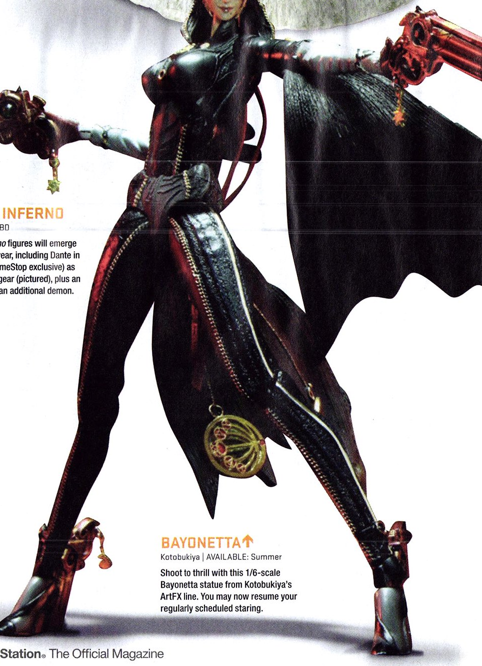
Hardened warrior Soap MacTavish might do some climbing, or he might do some killing. Luckily, this 12-inch statue comes with three separate arms and weapons (pickaxes, pistols, and rifle), and all the goodies can be stored within the base, or on Soap's back.



←DANTE'S INFERNO

NECA | AVAILABLE: TBD

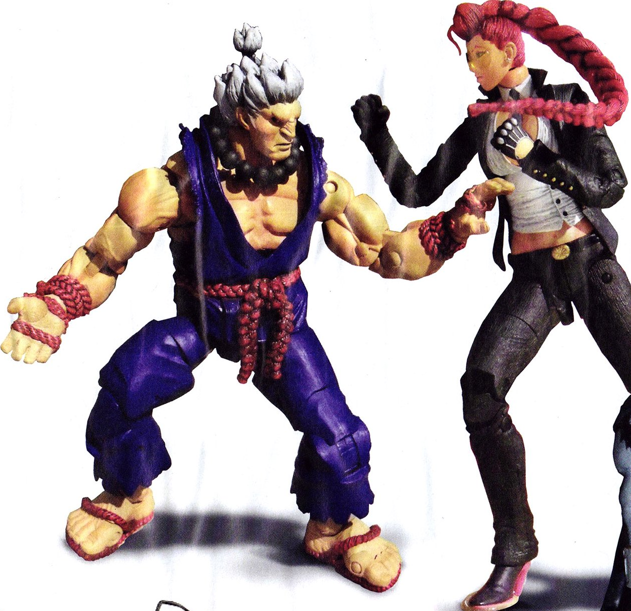
Several *Dante's Inferno* figures will emerge from the depths this year, including Dante in shirtless variety (a GameStop exclusive) as well as his Crusades gear (pictured), plus an unbaptized baby and an additional demon.



BAYONETTA↑

Kotobukiya | AVAILABLE: Summer

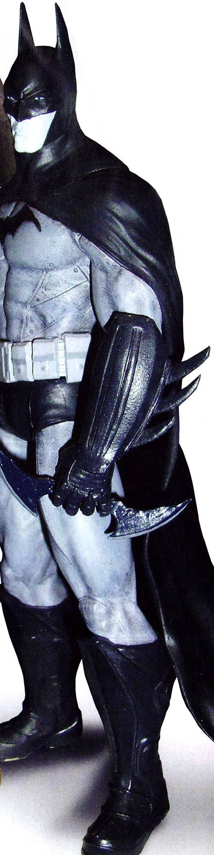
Shoot to thrill with this 1/6-scale Bayonetta statue from Kotobukiya's ArtFX line. You may now resume your regularly scheduled staring.



←STREET FIGHTER IV

NECA | AVAILABLE: Now

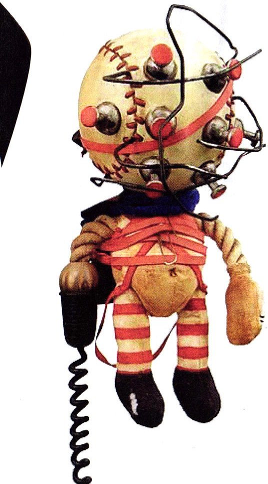
Six-inch Street Fighters from the classic brawler *Street Fighter IV* take to the field of battle. Finally, we can pit Akuma vs. Crimson Viper (pictured) or maybe Ken vs. Ryu, Chun-Li vs. Guile, or any combination thereof in no-holds-barred real-world fisticuffs.



BATMAN →

DC Direct | AVAILABLE: September

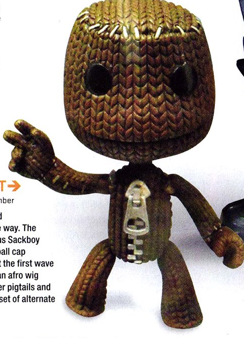
Gamers will be drooling over Arkham Asylum Batman, another outstandingly accurate sculpt from the popular Batman Black and White line.



←BIOSHOCK 2

NECA | AVAILABLE: Now

BioShock fans should be excited at the prospect of more figures, including the imposing Big Daddy Elite, Splicer, Deluxe Big Daddy Bouncer Rosie, and Little Sister & Eleanor Lamb two-pack. And, of course, who could deny the charm and appeal of this Big Daddy plush figure? No one who wants to live to see tomorrow, that's for sure.



LITTLEBIGPLANET→

Mezco Toys | AVAILABLE: September

Series 1 of the much-anticipated *LittleBigPlanet* figures are on the way. The first wave includes the ubiquitous Sackboy (pictured here without his baseball cap accessory). It's not finalized, but the first wave might also include Marvin with an afro wig and sunglasses, and Sky with her pigtails and black dress. Each will include a set of alternate hands as well as a pop-it lasso.

4

Tangled Web

Spider-Man does his own Fantastic Four

Spider-Man has seen more clones than George Lucas. He lost his wife to a deal with the devil and survived the great embarrassment that was the spectacular Spider-Mobile. Then, when it seemed the iconic superhero could sink no lower, Sam Raimi and Tobey McGuire gave the world emotional Spider-Man, dance sequences, and Topher Grace as the most fearsome villain since Lurky menaced the plucky heroine Rainbow Brite. And it was indeed worse than anyone could have rightly expected.

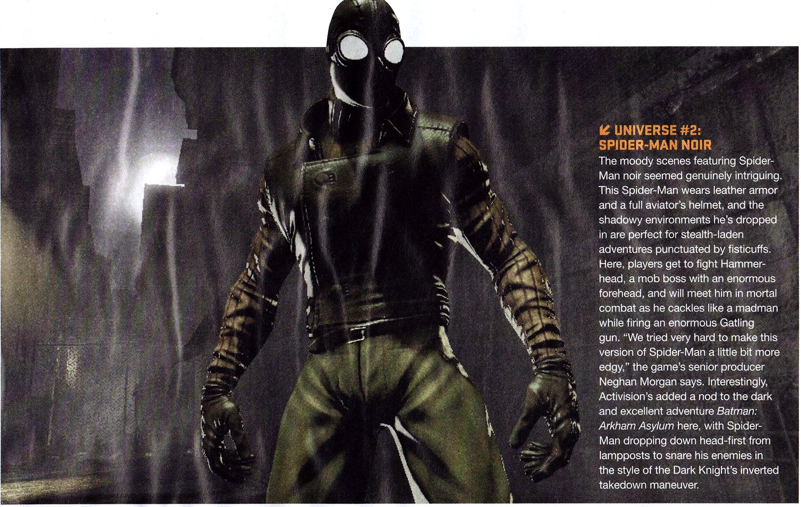
The time has come for a dramatic alteration of Spidey's worldview—four of them, in fact. With Activision's forthcoming *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions,* everyone's favorite bug man will be doing his own version of the Fantastic Four—with himself in every role.

Dimensions supposes four Spider-Men exist in four separate universes, and each Spidey must battle evil to recover one-quarter of a shattered tablet. Activision's announced only two of the four Spider-Men to appear in the game. We'll speculate on the rest...

UNIVERSE #1: CLASSIC SPIDER-MAN

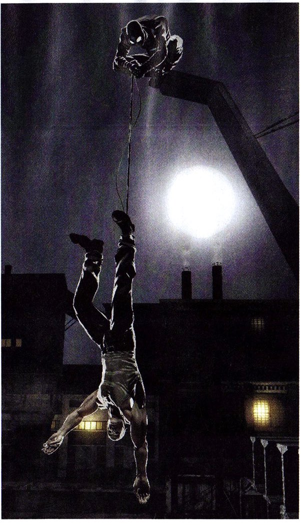
The Amazing Spider-Man everyone knows and loves will be dropped into the jungle to battle the villainous Kraven the Hunter. Bright and cel-shaded, this universe features a nimble Spider-Man more in tune with his comic book and movie versions. Spidey can bend at the knees, as if limboing, to avoid enemy attacks and leaps into the air while simultaneously swinging foes around in a circle via a web-line.

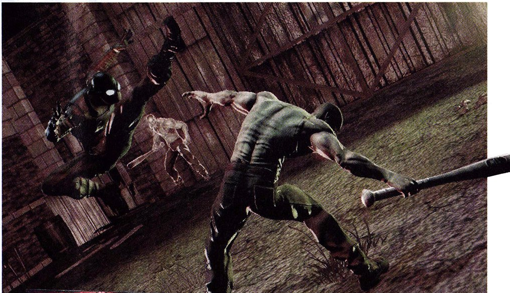
Oh, and Activision and developer Beenox take Spider-Man into the first-person perspective. During boss fights, the game alters its view to show the enemy and Spider-Man's disembodied arms. What plays out next is a direct nod to (or, perhaps, ripoff of) Nintendo's seminal boxing game, *Punch-Out!,* complete with lots of hurt feelings; as Spider-Man works his pugilistic thunder, his foe's face will become lumped up and bruised. An early version of *Dimensions* also featured Spider-Man walking on walls in the first-person perspective, but the developers stressed this may be cut from the final version.

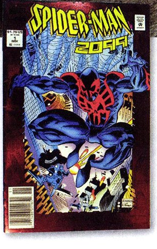


↙ UNIVERSE #2: SPIDER-MAN NOIR

The moody scenes featuring Spider-Man noir seemed genuinely intriguing. This Spider-Man wears leather armor and a full aviator's helmet, and the shadowy environments he's dropped in are perfect for stealth-laden adventures punctuated by fisticuffs. Here, players get to fight Hammerhead, a mob boss with an enormous forehead, and will meet him in mortal combat as he cackles like a madman while firing an enormous Gatling gun. "We tried very hard to make this version of Spider-Man a little bit more edgy," the game's senior producer Neghan Morgan says. Interestingly, Activision's added a nod to the dark and excellent adventure *Batman: Arkham Asylum* here, with Spider-Man dropping down head-first from lampposts to snare his enemies in the style of the Dark Knight's inverted takedown maneuver.







← UNIVERSES #3 AND #4

It's all speculation, of course, but *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions* has a few ways it could go in presenting the other two alternate Spider-Man universes. The most obvious choice here is *Spider-Man 2099,* a futuristic version of the character who possessed most of the original Spidey's powers plus a venomous bite and a special costume that allowed him to glide for short distances. The least obvious (and most absurd) choice would likely be Peter Porker, the Spectacular Spider-Ham. Porker was, in fact, a spider who gained his powers by being bitten by a radioactive pig.

5
+
$15
Battlefield:
Bad Company 2

"Initiate Project Ten Dollar!"

We break down the latest salvo in the cold war between videogame publishers and used game resellers

Electronic Arts' latest attempt to curtail the profit loss resulting from used-game sales is either remarkably savvy or appallingly underhanded. Its new initiative—commonly referred to as Project Ten Dollar—attempts to reward "original purchasers" of certain EA titles by packaging sealed copies with one-time-use download codes redeemable for free additional content. Those who do not purchase these games new are forced to shell out extra cash if they want the same content.

While gamers everywhere will naturally be upset that the $5 or $10 they'll save by buying a used game has suddenly been rendered forfeit (assuming they want to fully experience the game they purchased), the obvious rebuttal is, "Well, you don't *have* to buy the extra content." So the deeper question then becomes: How essential is this content? Is EA rewarding new-game buyers with added bonus content, or is it punishing used-game buyers by withholding content that should have been part of the game? Check out the Project's progress so far and decide for yourself.

BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2

Gamers who buy *Bad Company 2* new will enjoy four additional multiplayer maps that would otherwise cost $15. Obviously, not being able to participate in any matches on those four maps is a major loss. Even more irritating: The maps are already *on* the disc; you just have to enter a code to unlock them. This is definitely Project Ten Dollar at its worst.

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

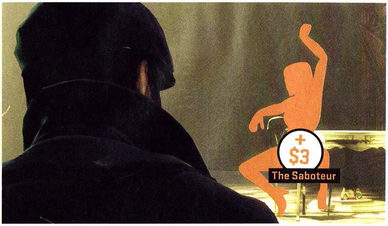
Original purchasers of BioWare's *Dragon Age: Origins* receive a free downloadable content pack "The Stone Prisoner," which contains a new playable character as well as additional environments and items. This feels more like traditional DLC—a nice bonus for original owners but a nonessential $15 purchase for the used gamers…who may not care anyway. They did wait to buy the game used, after all.

THE SABOTEUR

If you pick up a sealed copy of *The Saboteur,* you'll be treated to some free boobs and a few added hiding spots around the game's black-and-white rendered Paris. If you buy a pre-owned copy, you'll have to cough up $3 for the peep show. Frankly, who cares?

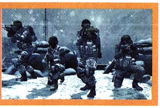
Do publishers have a right to protect themselves? Does Project Ten Dollar go too far? Or is it simply not a big deal? Let us know at PTOM_Letters@futureus.com*.*

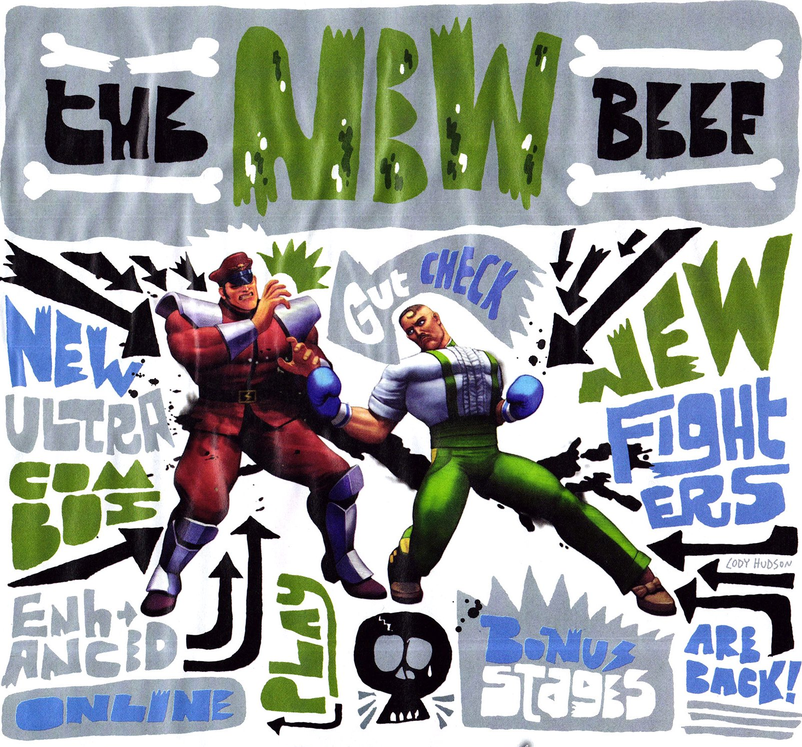
+
$15
Dragon Age:
Origins



FIRETEAM FOLLOWERS

Will other publishers follow Electronic Arts' example? Sony recently pulled a similar trick with *SOCOM: Fireteam Bravo 3*—gamers who picked up a pre-owned copy had to pay $20 to play online, while those who bought the game new received a free voucher. This may be the start of a new trend.

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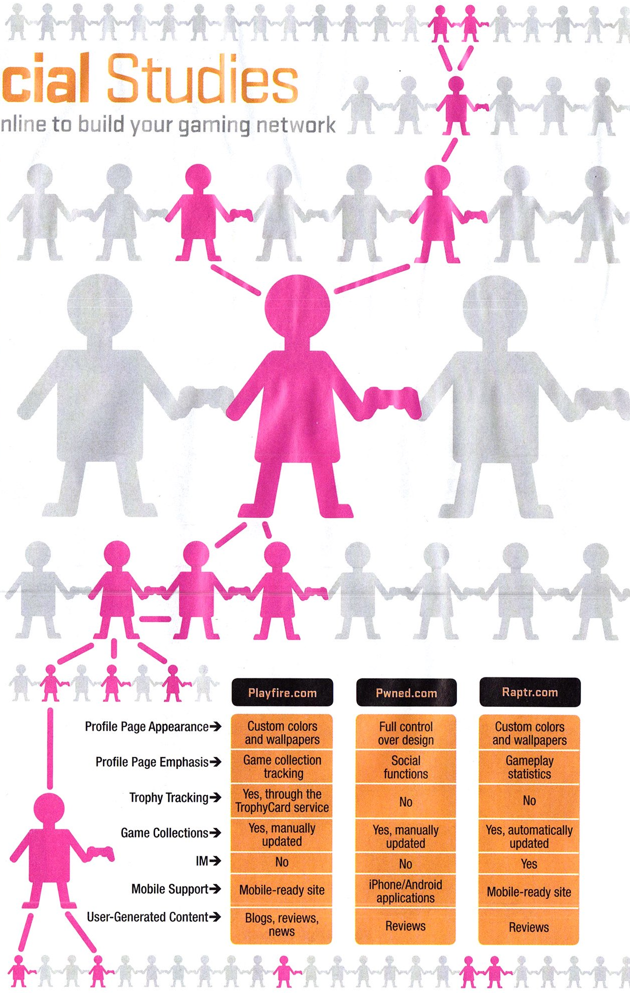
6

Social Studies

Head online to build your gaming network



It's possible, although not advisable, to find anything on the World Wide Web. For Sony fans, it's eminently smart to go online to find gaming partners.

"As we got older, it was harder to find people to play online with," says Andy Briggs, co-founder of the social site Pwned.com. The site uses a redeemable currency called "Pwned Points" to encourage members to break out of their routines and interact with other gamers on the site. It seems to work, as over a million points have been redeemed since the site launched.

Raptr.com takes a similar approach to social networking, but their advantage comes in the "Raptr Client," which not only serves Raptr content but offers connectivity to almost every major messaging client and gaming network. "I have friends who are big on gaming," notes forum poster "Gnack," "so it's handy Raptr aggregates all the services."

Known mostly for its TrophyCard (a sharable image boasting earned Playstation Network Trophies), Playfire.com pushes in yet another direction with a strong focus on user-generated content. From news updates to blog posts and quizzes, the site is built around its community member's enthusiasm for their favorite games. "When you participate," the site's founder Kieran O'Neil says, "we'll show [your favorites] to other fans who can then interact with you."

However, the question still remains as to why making friends in online games is so difficult. For Liam Donovan, a forum poster, the problem seems clear: "Most of the time, if I wasn't playing with my real-life friends, I was stuck with people I'd never want to be friends with." One of these three sites might provide the solution—check out our handy chart to see which site is right for *you*.

	Playfire.com	Pwned.com	Raptr.com
Profile Page Appearance➔	Custom colors and wallpapers	Full control over design	Custom colors and wallpapers
Profile Page Emphasis➔	Game collection tracking	Social functions	Gameplay statistics
Trophy Tracking➔	Yes, through the TrophyCard service	No	No
Game Collections➔	Yes, manually updated	Yes, manually updated	Yes, automatically updated
IM➔	No	No	Yes
Mobile Support➔	Mobile-ready site	iPhone/Android applications	Mobile-ready site
User-Generated Content➔	Blogs, reviews, news	Reviews	Reviews

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- Recording Arts
- Show Production
- Web Design & Development

Associate's
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- Recording Engineering

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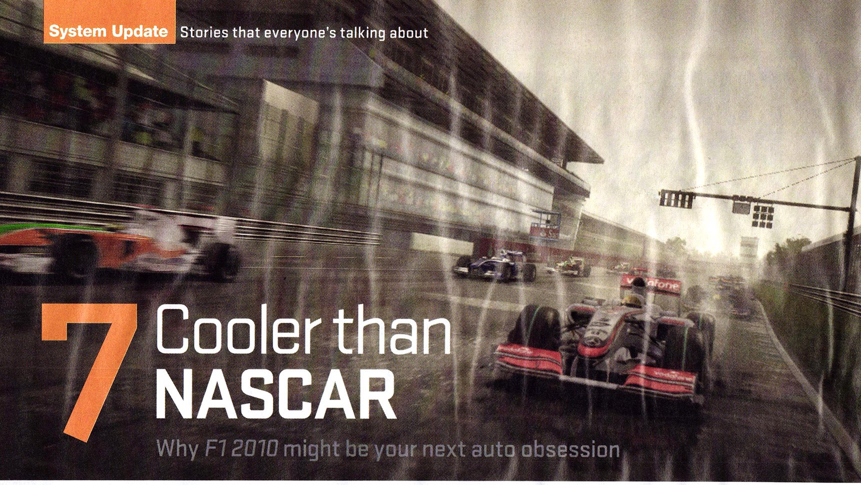
- Education Media Design & Technology
- Entertainment Business
- Entertainment Business: *with a Sports Management Elective Track*
- Internet Marketing
- Media Design

Bachelor's
- Computer Animation
- Entertainment Business
- ▸ Game Art
- ▸ Game Design
- Graphic Design
- Internet Marketing
- Music Business
- Music Production
- Web Design & Development



7 Cooler than NASCAR

Why *F1 2010* might be your next auto obsession

Sure, it's huge just about anywhere else except for America—but then again, so are other sports like curling and badminton. But don't let the Formula 1 license put you off. *F1 2010* is a serious racing game from a serious dev team that knows its racers. How do we know? We got an exclusive road test with Codemasters' upcoming autumn release.

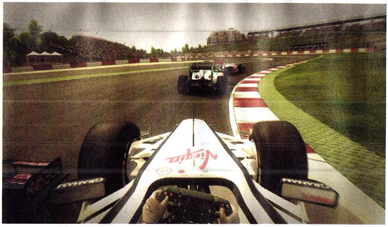
Our first impression: Although elements of the handling behave similarly to stablemate *Dirt 2,* this is no rally game. The cars feel hugely powerful and energizingly fast, yet supremely delicate at the same time—exactly how we imagine driving a real F1 car feels.

The dev team is keen to press home that while *F1 2010* shares tech with *Dirt* and *Grid,* that's where the similarities end. "There's a lot more effort gone into the physics and suspension," says studio head Alex McLean, "because there's a lot more going on in an F1 car in those areas than in a rally car, especially in the way it pivots. Getting the aerodynamics right—the downforce in particular—is paramount."

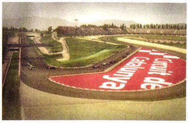
Pole dancing

We immediately love the feel of the driving, especially once we got tangled up with the competition. *F1 2010* features all 26 drivers from the real season, and the team has put effort into making each feel human. To demonstrate, we repeatedly try to nip inside one driver on the corners—and each time the AI responds by cutting across our path. Later on, we stick so tightly to a teammate's tail that the mental pressure forces him to oversteer on a corner and spin onto the gravel. Soon other human traits of AI drivers become clear. They attempt to make use of our slipstream, but weave out of the way when we try to return the favor. When the dynamic weather kicks in, some even run the risk of staying on dry tires for a lap or two in order to make up ground on the race leader.

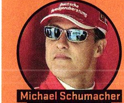
On the subject of the weather, it's incredible. See the sheets of rain in the screenshots? That's how it looks in-game. And it's more than aesthetic. For every square-foot section of track, the game monitors the buildup of heat, rubber, water, and wear, meaning the course is constantly evolving.



Codemasters is keen to attract newcomers to the sport, especially the NASCAR-obsessed American market. "We appreciate the subtlety and finesse that the more hardcore end of the market expects," explains McLean, "and we need to have elements of that in there. But first and foremost it's got to be accessible."

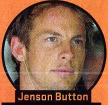


CAR STARS Three F1 drivers that you need to know



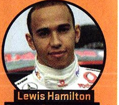
Michael Schumacher

Retired in 2006 with seven world titles. Now he's unretiring—seven's not enough, apparently.



Jenson Button

Won his first F1 title last year. This season, expect him to reclaim his "plucky also-ran" tag.



Lewis Hamilton

Became F1's youngest-ever world champ in 2008. Unbelievably, this is his videogame debut.

Bah, peacetime. What fun is that? We need more *Call of Duty*.

More War

What's next for *Call of Duty*

Like a roadside IED, the internet suddenly exploded in March after a bit of unexpected (and apparently unwelcome) restructuring at Infinity Ward, *Modern Warfare's* powerhouse developer. Rumors about the future of the *Call of Duty* franchise flew after IW's two top dogs abruptly left the company. But we're not worried. In fact, we're hopeful and excited. Here's why:

First, Activision has announced Treyarch *(CoD: World at War)* will return in 2010 with another addition to the series. Nothing was confirmed as of press time, but the smart money points to a Vietnam War setting, whose infamous guerilla warfare absolutely oozes potential. Following that, a yet-unnamed developer is currently working on another *Call of Duty* for next year. Given the development time between *Modern Warfare* and its sequel, a third *MW* title would fit that slot perfectly.

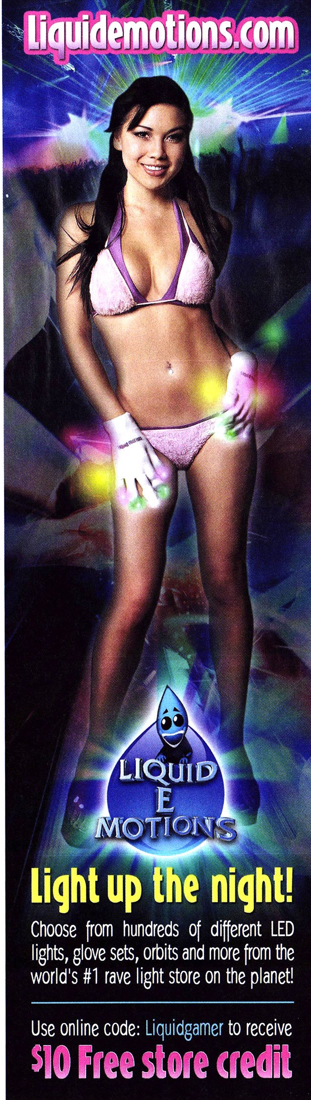
Most interesting, however, is Activision's recent acquisition of Sledgehammer Games. Comprised of a few former *Dead Space* developers, the studio is currently working on a *CoD* title with a twist: It's being vaguely referred to as an "action/adventure" game. Is it *Modern Warfare 3?* Or is it a series spin-off?

Meanwhile, we've yet to learn what Infinity Ward is up to. Although they're still working on (temporarily Xbox 360-exclusive) *MW2* map packs, we won't be surprised to see them hand the reins over to another developer. Sure, the franchise has been the foundation of their success, but numerous team members have been vocal about their desire to develop a new, entirely original IP.

Go, Kart!

ModNation Racers will dominate your PSP

Really, what more is there to say? It's shaping up to be a fun kart racer, it looks great, it's the perfect game for portable play sessions, and it's got that whole create/share thing too. Awesome! Look for it later this year, releasing alongside its PS3 big brother.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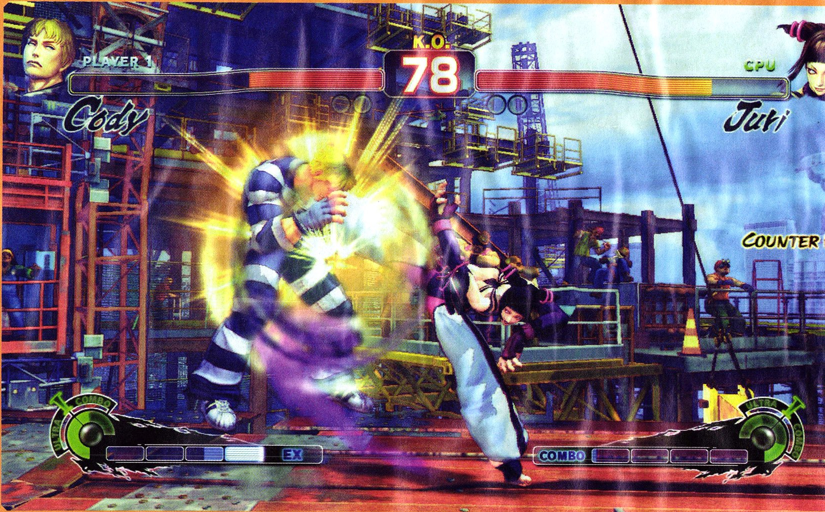
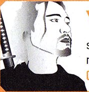


***Street Fighter IV* comes packed with complex combohydrates.**

10 Are videogames getting too complex?

Wait, we have to do more than press X?!



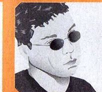
YES

says the simple-minded savant **Gary Steinman**

I'm a simple man who enjoys simple pleasures. Gaming is one of them.

While it sometimes seems like I've been gaming for longer than games existed, every now and then I'll be utterly confounded by a jumble of contradictory commands or a convoluted control scheme that crops up in a game I was eager to play. Take *Resonance of Fate,* which we review in this issue. I know it's a solid JRPG, and perhaps one day I'll actually play more than two hours of it. But when it takes a good six hours just to *begin* to understand its battle system—well, I just don't have the patience for that.

And then there are open-world games, which still don't appeal to me. Don't give me a sandbox to play in. Don't hand me the shovels and the buckets. How about *you* build me a sand castle, Mr. Developer—and make it fun. In other words, give me a *God of War* or a *Ratchet & Clank,* then get out of the my way and let me play.

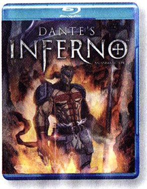


NO

says the complex mechanism man **Greg Orlando**

Videogames are, generally, neither overly nor needlessly complex. We make games simple for sheer enjoyment, and we make games difficult for the challenge. It may be that *Street Fighter IV* with its endless string of joystick maneuvers and timed button-presses is too much for the common man to bear, but it's not as if the game is wholly inaccessible. It's possible to enjoy the face-pummeling without knowing exactly how to perform the Crushing Fist of Ultimate Sorrow or its close companion the Elbow of You're Probably Going to Need Stitches for That.

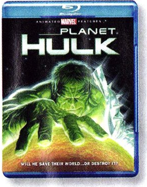
We shouldn't shy away from games that expect a lot of us. There's something to be said for a game presenting a series of ideas, concepts, or mechanics that aren't immediately digestible. That's how we learn and grow: by being pushed. Like the wise man says, *you got to pay your dues if you want to sing the blues. And you,* unlike my esteemed opposition, *know it don't come easy.*



Dante's Inferno

PRICE: $34.98 **RATED:** R

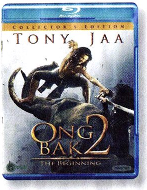
+ As marketing gimmicks go, this animated version of *Dante's Inferno* (the videogame, not the original poem) is actually a lot of fun. The story differs in some noticeable ways from the game, and there's certainly no literary value here—but this *Inferno* is a welcome addition to the rather scarce adult-aimed animation genre. Dante's journey into animated hell looks and moves a lot like a *Heavy Metal* movie with satisfying violence and creepy cool visuals. Sadly, there are almost no extras—just a trailer for the game and some rough sketch comparisons.



Planet Hulk

PRICE: $29.99 **RATED:** R/UNRATED

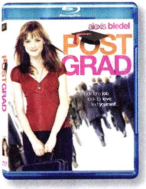
+ Lionsgate's Marvel comic book-based animated films have a ways to go before they catch up with Warner's amazing DC titles, but *Planet Hulk* is a step in the right direction. Fans of the epic storyline should know up front that this a heavily edited and minimal interpretation of the comic, and some key plot elements are sadly missing. That said, the core storyline is strong enough to satisfy Hulk fans and the movie doesn't skimp when it comes to Hulk smashing. There's also a lot of extras included, although it's largely promo material for the other Marvel animated titles.



Ong Bak 2

PRICE: $29.98 **RATED:** R

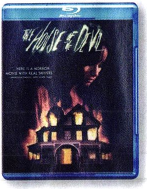
+ Tony Jaa is awesome. It's that simple. This "prequel" to *Ong Bak* takes place long ago in Thailand, with an ending that leads directly to *Ong Bak 3*. The plot is mostly throwaway, but the cast includes some of the meanest, ugliest human beings on the planet and the action sequences are always entertaining and occasionally spectacular. There's a variety of behind-the-scenes extras, though nothing earth-shatteringly interesting. Still, for fans of martial arts flicks, this is an absolute must see.



Post Grad

PRICE: $39.99 **RATED:** PG-13

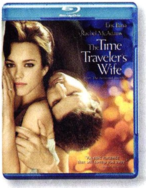
+ If you're looking for a harmless date-night flick, *Post Grad* is it. Although anyone over 30 will be screaming at the main character (the cute and quirky Alexis Bledel) to stop acting stupid, what really saves this movie are the peripheral characters—Michael Keaton and Jane Lynch as the quirky parents and Carol Burnett as the crazy grandma. It's nothing you haven't seen before, but there are enough flashes of smart to make it worth a look.



The House of the Devil

PRICE: $34.98 **RATED:** R

+ A love song to slow-burning horror movies of the '70s and '80s, *The House of the Devil* is carefully constructed so that every detail—from the opening credits to the fixtures in the house—is perfectly aligned to that era. The movie is all about the deliberate buildup of suspense—a lone girl stuck in an old house on an excruciating journey to the horrifying inevitable. Some will find the pace too sluggish, but the skillful filmmaking and quality cast make it worthwhile. The commentary tracks are insightful as well.



The Time Traveler's Wife

PRICE: $35.98 **RATED:** PG-13

− For those in need of schmaltzy romantic drama, *The Time Traveler's Wife* certainly fits the bill. The movie is partially a fascinating look at how randomly traveling through time can ruin your life. To that end, the effects are excellent, and there are some clever and funny situations as sad sack Eric Bana suddenly appears in places naked and confused. Unfortunately, the romance aspects of the movie are hampered by clumsy dialogue and pacing, and the movie just drags when it isn't messing with time and space.

'80s Time Capsule

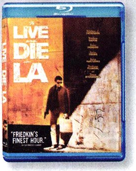
Return with us to the decade of yuppies and shoulder pads

SCHWARZENEGGER
THE RUNNING MAN

The Running Man

PRICE: $19.99 **RATED:** R

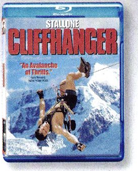
Still one of the most entertaining takes on violent TV game shows, and seeing Yaphet Kotto in a skintight jumpsuit is just funny, dammit. And creepy.



To Live and Die in LA

PRICE: $24.99 **RATED:** R

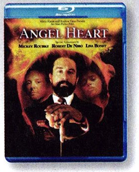
William Friedkin will always be known as the director of *The French Connection,* but this era-defining thriller is right up there in his canon. Tense, violent, and a soundtrack by Wang Chung. Awesome.



Cliffhanger

PRICE: $24.95 **RATED:** R

Easily one of Stallone's best from the decade and amazingly violent. John Lithgow, as a crazy psycho villain, steals the show, but even Stallone is great in this brutal guilty pleasure.



Angel Heart

PRICE: $19.99 **RATED:** R

If you can't remember a time when Mickey Rourke was considered sexy, take a gander at this dark, moody sex-and-devil-addled noir. And Lisa Bonet gets naked.

Questions, comments, rants, raves about our Blu-ray reviews? Email Jason D'Aprile at **PTOM_Bluray@futureus.com.**

Blu-ray Central

Blu-ray Disc
STARGATE
SG·U
UNIVERSE
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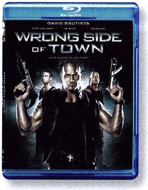
Stargate Universe

PRICE: $69.99 RATED: UNRATED

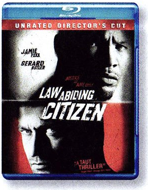
+ MGM has done right by fans of sci-fi (or is it SyFy now?) with its release of the first part of *Stargate Universe* in beautiful HD. Although it's only the first 10 episodes of season one (the rest of the season should be starting up on SyFy this month), the high production values, interesting characters, and tight scripts are a good sign that the show has a bright future. Ditching the usual cliché of evil aliens that *Stargate* usually clings to, *SGU* takes on a much darker tone than *SG-1* or *Atlantis*. The basic premise relies on human conflict and isolation aboard a million-year-old alien vessel far from home, along with body-switching communication devices, constantly failing systems, and uncovering the vast secrets of the universe. The cast is universally excellent, but it's Robert Carlyle, as a broody and secretive genius scientist, and David Blue, as the crew's resident nerd, who really steal the show. *SGU* isn't completely original by any means, but the use of *Battlestar Galactica*-style drama and cinematography in the established *Stargate* canon makes for meaty, entertaining fare. An array of behind-the-scenes extras and commentary tracks for all the episodes enhance the collection.



Wrong Side of Town

PRICE: $29.99 RATED: R

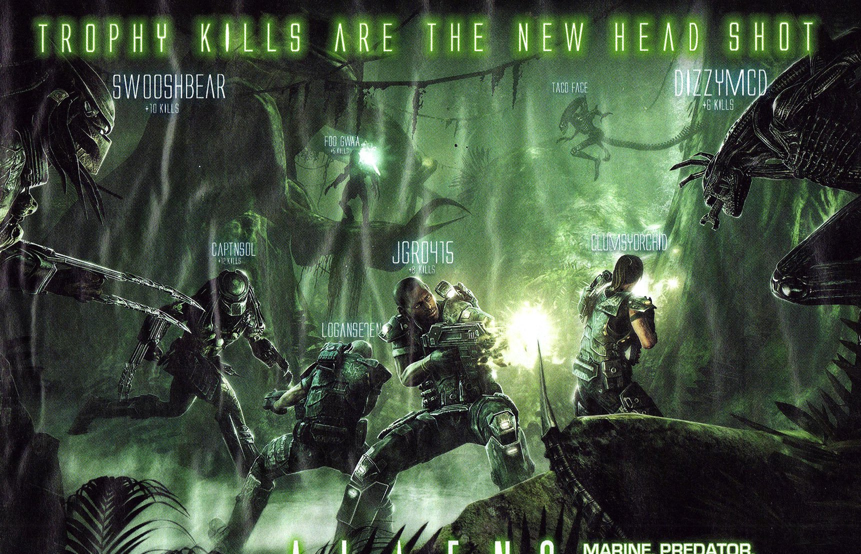
− WWE wrestler Rob Van Dam not only looks Jean-Claude, but is also equally devoid of acting skills. But even with a lame plot and fight scenes that look like poorly choreographed wrestling matches, *Wrong Side of Town* still isn't as unwatchable as most other WWE-related movies. Admittedly, that damning praise only applies to hardcore WWE or so-bad-it's-good video fans—everyone else should stay in the *right* side of town. And in a slap to RVD, the cover art features fighting badass David Bautista...though he's only in the movie for about 10 minutes. Unsurprisingly, he's a lousy actor too.



Law Abiding Citizen

PRICE: $39.98 RATED: R/UNRATED

+ Father revenge movies are apparently the rage lately, but Gerard Butler takes the cake for the craziest and most deadly. *Law Abiding Citizen* is basically a cross between *Taken* and *SAW* where Butler plays a father seeking vengeance not only against the people who brutally murdered his family, but the the entire justice system as well. Butler is fantastic in the role, and some clever writing and plotting turns what could have been a clichéd mess into a surprisingly entertaining and intense cat-and-mouse game. Extras are a bit sparse unfortunately, and only the theatrical version has commentary.


TROPHY KILLS ARE THE NEW HEAD SHOT
SWOOSHBEAR
+10 KILLS
FOO GWAA
+5 KILLS
TACO FACE
DIZZYMCD
+6 KILLS
CAPTNSOL
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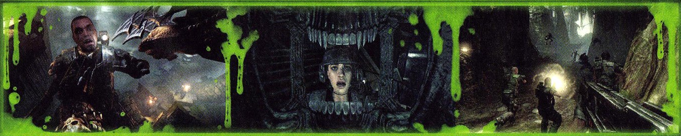

THE MULTI-SPECIES BATTLE BEGINS FEBRUARY 16, 2010

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PS3 PlayStation Network REBELLION 20th CENTURY FOX SEGA

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
Suggestive Themes

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Previews

First Look | Hands-On | In-Depth

LIVE GIRLS
Peep HOLE
EK

> “Welcome to *Dead Rising 2’s* ‘oh yes we just went there’ world of over-the-top zombie debauchery.”

DEAD RISING 2

The massager is mightier than the sword

PS3 AVAILABLE: August GENRE: Action adventure PUBLISHER: Capcom DEVELOPER: Blue Castle/Capcom

You’d think that even the undead would be shocked. We’re throttling hordes of flesh-craving zombies with a giant “massager” while wearing assless leather chaps. [Is there any other kind? –Ed.] But the rampaging undead didn’t show even the slightest bit of nausea when, after clubbing enough of the infected humans, our phallic pink pleasure-giver was coated crimson with zombie blood. As clear-thinking humans, we were sure as hell starting to feel a bit queasy.

Welcome to *Dead Rising 2’s* “oh yes we just went there” world of over-the-top zombie debauchery. Fictional Fortune City’s been overrun by the undead and—dammit!—they must be stopped by any means necessary. (Though the leather chaps were admittedly anything but necessary.)

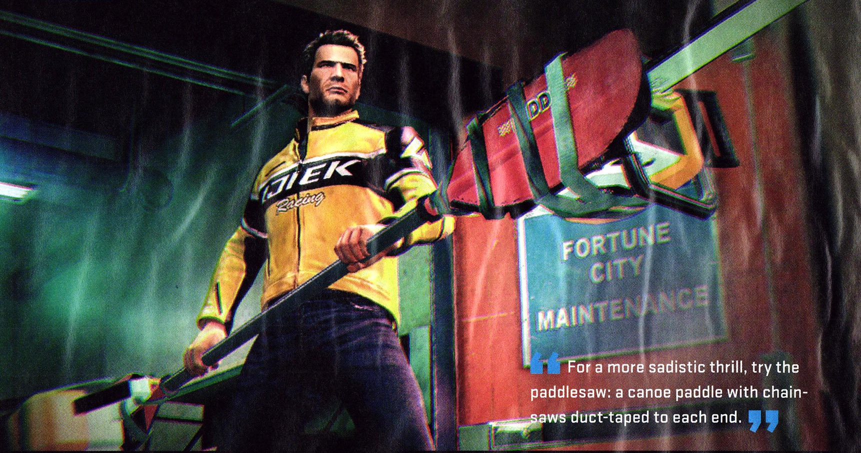
While PlayStation loyalists might understandably be a bit lost on the story, it hardly matters, as it’s not difficult to figure out *Rising 2’s* “see zombie, kill zombie with anything you’ve got handy” formula. “Anything” here includes, but is hardly limited to: wheelchairs, picnic tables, umbrellas, guns, children’s toys, guitars, baseball bats, and hundreds of other common everyday items. Thousands of zombies can crowd the screen at any given moment, and you’re going to need to carve through many more than that if you want to get out of the faux-Las Vegas alive.

Chop shop

We are extreme sports superstar Chuck Greene. As a dirt-biking champ we don’t have much to say, but we’re a crafty S.O.B., able to combine various items together to concoct new ways of killing the undead. All we need to do is lug items to the workbenches scattered around Fortune City’s maintenance hallways and then MacGyver our way to weapons even more effective than the aforementioned massager.

Among those we came up with during our hands-on time: a gasoline-filled Super Soaker water gun with a lighter on the end to make it a homemade flamethrower. Effectiveness? Not so good, as zombies don’t care if they’re engulfed in flames and kept coming after us until their flesh completely seared off.

We had better luck crafting a tossable sticky bomb from a propane tank with outward-facing nails taped to it. Aim for a zombie in the middle of a big crowd, chuck the impromptu IED, then switch to a handgun to detonate for maximum impact. It’s reasonably effective although it takes a while to set up the attack.



> For a more sadistic thrill, try the paddlesaw: a canoe paddle with chainsaws duct-taped to each end.

For a more sadistic thrill, try the paddlesaw: a canoe paddle with chainsaws duct-taped to each end. Eventually, though, the saws will run out of gas and the weapon will break.

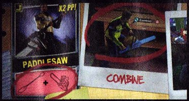
And the best of the bunch? Combining boxing gloves and bowie knives to assemble our very own Wolverine claws. Snikt-ing zombies with quick razor-sharp uppercuts couldn't have been more entertaining if Chuck were wearing ass-less chaps at the same time. Oh, wait…

Gore score

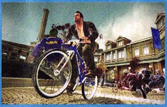
Expect a twisty plot to accompany all of the zombie-slaughtering mayhem, but Capcom isn't shedding any light on it just yet. Gameplay-wise, however, know that kills and combos will net Prestige Points (PP), used to level Chuck up and earn him more health and new abilities. In the demo level, earning enough PP in five minutes unlocked Chuck's dirt bike, which, as you might have guessed, has outward-jutting chainsaws affixed to it. Mowing through crowds of zombies like a hot chainsaw through buttery undead flesh is just one of many gameplay rewards in *Rising 2's* adventure.

Also new for the sequel is a four-player multiplayer mode that revolves around *Terror Is Reality,* an *American Gladiators*-esque reality-TV game show where we roll around in giant hamster balls, ride chainsaw-strapped dirt bikes, and face other grotesque challenges to see who can amass the highest undead body count.

Rising 2 is the ultimate zombie sandbox. Anything and everything goes, with both the laughter and fun factor increasing the more we experimented and embraced the universe's tongue-in-cheek absurdity. Remember, though: Zombies are plentiful and relentless, so you'll need to always cover your ass—especially when your pants don't. | Shane Zachary



↗ Create a new combination, and the game will archive it for future reference.



↑ Remembering Dead Rising…

In the original *Dead Rising,* photojournalist Frank West heads to fictional Willamette, Colorado, to find out why the town's been sealed off. It doesn't take long, naturally, before West is neck-deep in an undead apocalypse. By the end of the game (which has multiple endings), West is infected with the zombie virus and discovers an evil plot to spread the infestation by seeding 50 foster children with the disease and placing them in unsuspecting homes across the country. The fates of Frank West and the 50 infected kids, and how new protagonist Chuck Greene gets involved, are all mysteries as we await the release of *Dead Rising 2.*

↘ "Call me 'bub' one more time… I dare you!"

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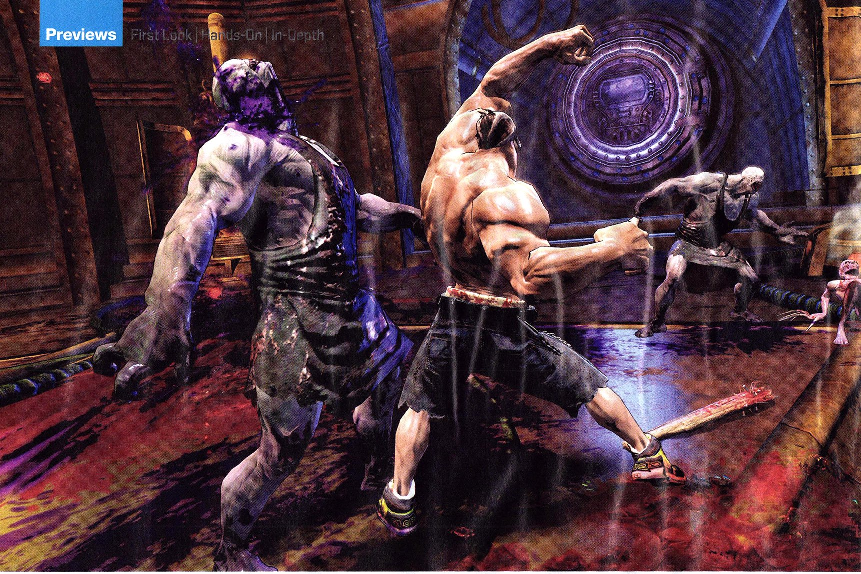


SPLATTERHOUSE

Home sweet gory home

PS3 **AVAILABLE:** September **GENRE:** Adventure **PUBLISHER:** Namco Bandai **DEVELOPER:** Namco Bandai

In the house that drips blood, the man with the stain-resistant suit would be king if not for the *other* guy—the one wearing the mystical mask and wielding the chainsaw. Should a dispute arise as to ascension to the throne, rest assured Las Vegas odds would be squarely placed on the other guy.

Poor, misguided Rick. He has forgotten the one great universal truth: When someone invites you to the Splatterhouse, you tell your would-be host to cram it, preferably with candied walnuts. On the worst day of his life, Rick makes his visit, sees his girlfriend kidnapped by a madman, and then becomes a muscle-bound monster after donning a mystical (and decidedly blood-crazed) Mayan terror mask.

Splatterhouse offers viscous fluids aplenty. The promotional literature for the third-person beat-'em-up adventure promises that a "directional blood and gore system adds to even more immersive gameplay, with fluids and guts flying and splatting in sympathetic response to attacks and environmental factors." The developers at Namco Bandai have also implemented a "splatterkill" system to further augment and highlight the violent proceedings, with the protagonist able to, say, crush a foe's skull or physically rip its body in two.

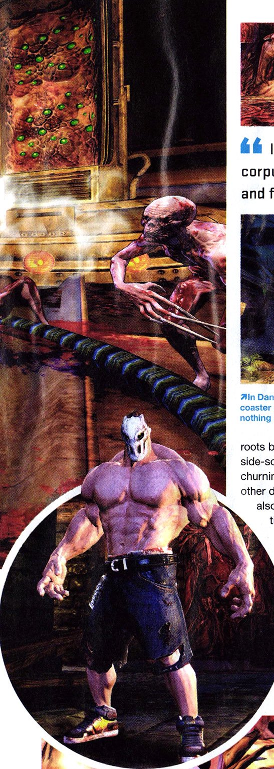
Seeking blood donors

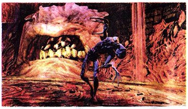
Namco Bandai wants players to feel it. It, of course, being every tiny of bit of brutality *Splatterhouse* has to offer. This means there will no quick-time events wherein random button presses perform acts of savagery, and no cutscene kills. "You may as well put the controller down on the desk," Nigel Cook, the game's executive producer says about non-interactive slaughter. "In *Splatterhouse,* the player will feel like they themselves are committing these brutal acts."

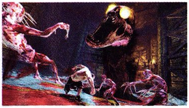
Splatterkills, which serve as the delightful topping on this bloody sundae, are performed with the DualShock's analog sticks: Crushing skulls, say, requires the sticks to be pushed together to simulate the contraction of the hands. Simply pressing the analog sticks together won't cut it, though, as the oftentimes chatty terror mask demands blood and lots of it. Instead, it's necessary to "milk" copious amounts of corpuscles from a victim by wiggling the sticks back and forth, squeezing and contracting before the kill is complete. Collect enough blood, and Rick can enter a frenzy wherein he's invulnerable and able to access all his most powerful moves.

The game pays homage to its arcade- and 16-bit home console

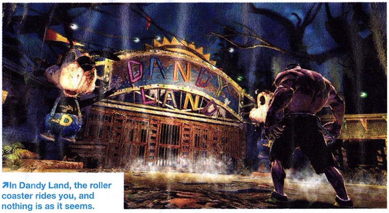
↘ The latest meeting of the Leif Garrett Fan Club ended horribly.



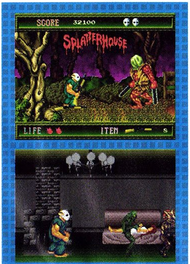




“It’s necessary to ‘milk’ copious amounts of corpuscles from a victim by wiggling the sticks back and forth, before the kill is complete.”



↗In Dandy Land, the roller coaster rides you, and nothing is as it seems.



↗ This Old House

Splatterhouse does more than just pay homage to its roots. The new version of the game includes, as unlockable content, the original *Splatterhouse* (the uncensored Japanese arcade game version) as well as the Sega Genesis’ *Splatterhouse 2* and *3*. No mention was made as to how these titles are unlocked.

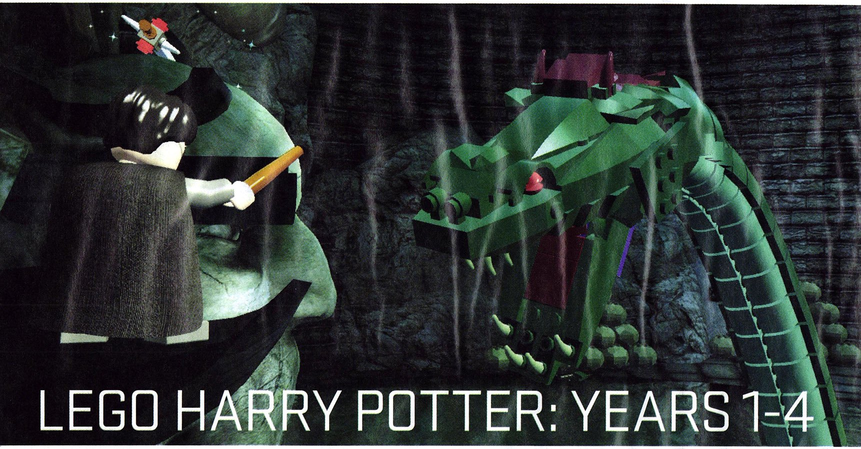
roots by throwing in two-dimensional, side-scrolling levels with huge wheels churning razor-sharp blades and other deadly traps. *Splatterhouse* also offers moments of unintentional black comedy in the form of hideous, burping door-mouths that must be fed enemy bodies before they open, and arenas where it’s necessary to shove beasties, ass-first, onto huge spikes before incinerating them with fire.

Giant eyes will be ripped from their (wall) sockets. Blood spurts, drips, and oozes from every surface. And after witnessing an enemy evisceration that wasn’t quite grotesque enough, Cook quickly notes his dev team will be adding to the effect: “There *will* be innards,” he promises.

Monkey see, monkey spew

As his gruesome crusade marches onward, Rick will be pitted against Robo-Ape, a huge Kong-like monstrosity with a metal bludgeon for a hand. (“He’s a bad monkey,” says Daniel Tovar, the game’s associate producer.) Ripping out the huge diodes in Ape’s head cripples the beast enough for Rick to sever its metal hand and then dispatch the monster in a fashion altogether inappropriate for those with delicate sensibilities. Later still, Rick must confront a huge pile of—no lie—*furniture* animated by a malicious spirit. Ripping at the furniture monster’s innards reveals that, yes, even a beast composed of Naugahyde, vinyl, and pleather can bleed. A lot.

There had been some concerns about *Splatterhouse*. Initially, Bottle-Rocket Entertainment worked on the title, but development had, apparently, stalled. Namco Bandai took the game in-house, but things now seem to be proceeding toward a satisfying, gore-soaked conclusion. | Greg Orlando



↙ Looky: special LEGO fangs. Back in the day, we used standard 1x1 bricks and were glad to have 'em.

LEGO HARRY POTTER: YEARS 1-4

Witchcraft, wizardry, and basic structural engineering

PS3 **AVAILABLE:** May **GENRE:** Platformer
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Ent.
DEVELOPER: Traveller's Tales

The title really says it all: the enchanting, whimsical world of *Harry Potter* meets the refreshingly wholesome platforming and puzzle-solving of *LEGO* games for the ultimate one-two punch of charming family fun. It's a match made in franchise crossover heaven.

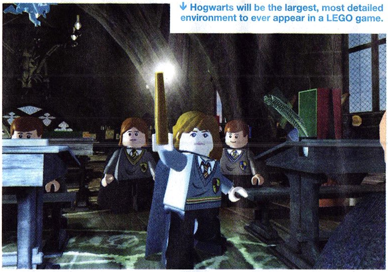
LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4 is a whirlwind tour through the events of the first four novels that lets us relive all those delightful defining moments from the first half of the series. Favorite memories like Harry discovering his Quidditch Seeker talent and Hermione's rescue from the dreaded bathroom troll are all recreated in block form with the requisite dash of tongue-in-cheek LEGO humor.

As the narrative progresses, all the exotic locales of the Potter universe are revealed, including Diagon Alley, the Forbidden Forest, Hogsmeade, and of course, Hogwarts castle. Hogwarts also serves as an open game hub that can be explored between missions.

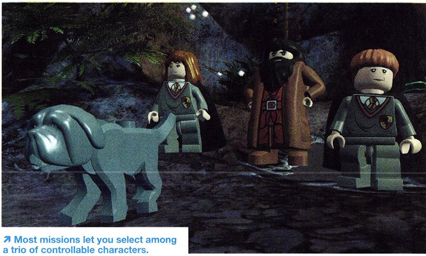
Characters actually develop over the course of the game—a first for a *LEGO* title—gradually learning new spells and skills that help open more areas to explore. Though we begin the game with just a generic wand wave that let's us interact with the environment, we'll eventually unlock more famous spells like "Lumos" and "Wingardium Leviosa" and be able to transmogrify unwitting students into various pint-sized critters. We'll eventually control approximately 140 unique characters ranging from the boy wizard himself all the way down to Hagrid's dog Fang.

Co-op play seems naturally suited for all the potion-mixing, broom-flying, and item-collecting, so the game includes an innovative splitscreen system in addition to the standard online play. Rather than simply dividing the view in half, the splitscreen mode places a pivoting bar between players to aid in navigation and tracking their relative positions.

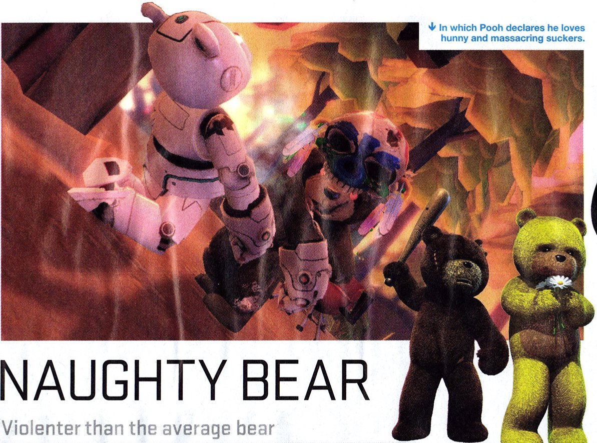
While the prolific *LEGO* series has become somewhat formulaic of late, The *Harry Potter* franchise may be just the one to add some magic back into the potion. | Scott Butterworth



↓ Hogwarts will be the largest, most detailed environment to ever appear in a LEGO game.



↗ Most missions let you select among a trio of controllable characters.



↓ In which Pooh declares he loves hunny and massacring suckers.

↑ Naughty By Nature

Now there's naughty, and then there's *Naughty*. It's possible to make enemy bears go insane in Naughty Bear and, from there, perform what the game's lead designer Ash Pannell describes as *Bear's* most horrifying act.

"Once [the bears] reach insanity, you can perform a special scare attack at which they finish themselves off for you," he says. This means that bears will commit *seppuku* with blades or beat themselves to death with sticks. Perform this act with other bears watching and, well, the results are truly, ah, catastrophic.

NAUGHTY BEAR

Violenter than the average bear

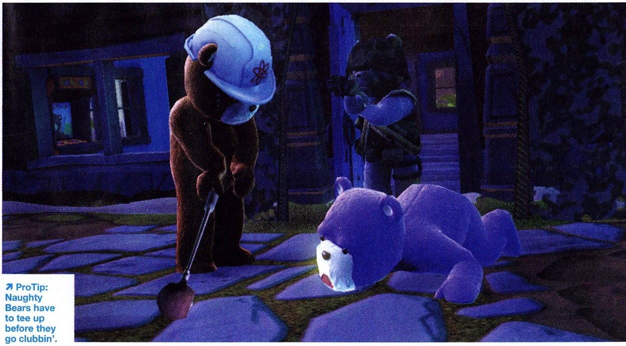
PS3 AVAILABLE: June GENRE: Adventure PUBLISHER: 505 Games DEVELOPER: Artificial Mind & Movement

The teddy bear jamboree will end quite horribly. Bet on it. *Naughty Bear* offers gratuitous violence. Its lead designer Ash Pannell describes the game as *"Teletubbies* meets *Friday the 13th."* He is not exaggerating. Not in the slightest.

The eponymous Naughty hacks up his fellow stuffed bears with machetes. He shoves their faces into lit barbecues and fuse boxes. He'll drop bear traps with malicious intent, play golf with other bears' heads, slam car doors with intent to maim, snap necks, swing for the fences in the manner of "Home Run" Homer Simpson, and, generally, extend the boundary of "naughty" to well beyond its breaking point.

"Chubby must be punished," *Naughty Bear* proclaims. Chubby bear is running for some kind of office on an anti-Naughty platform, which means the forecast calls for unrestrained violence with downpours of smitings in the third-person perspective. The goal, of course, is to create as much mischief, terror, death, and destruction as possible. The game tracks Naughty's actions; each act of antisocial behavior scores points and, also, fuels a combination meter.

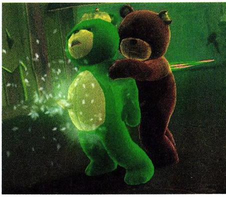
Characters roam the game world skipping stones in a river, attending parties, eating, and generally living fine teddy bear lives. These lives can be horribly, horribly ruined by Naughty's actions—they'll react to external stimuli and can be baited into traps. Destroy a circuit breaker, and a bear will go to fix it, presenting his backside—a tempting target. Scare the stuffing out of someone, and his pals will come by to see what the screaming is all about. Ultimately, it's the thoughtful kind of chaos that pays the biggest dividends.



↗ ProTip: Naughty Bears have to tee up before they go clubbin'.

Ninja bears race in on boats. Cop bears tote guns. Naughty's actions draw a crowd, and the influx of new weapons and enemies can be used to create even more terror and mayhem. Horror in mass quantities translates into credits, which can be redeemed toward costumes for Naughty. Costumes, then, provide a measure of camouflage; a cop uniform allows the bear to walk free and unmolested until his actions ultimately betray him.

Believe us, you'll never turn your back on your ol' stuffed childhood buddy again. | Greg Orlando



TRON EVOLUTION

Not your father's *Tron*

PS3 AVAILABLE: Fall GENRE: Action Adventure PUBLISHER: Disney Interactive Ent. DEVELOPER: Propaganda Games

Imagine a digital universe stretching into infinite darkness. Hovering at its center is a vast metropolis of bustling sentient beings living among impossibly tall skyscrapers illuminated by a shimmering aurora borealis. In this Neo Tokyo-esque city, human-like "programs" walk the streets, drive their vehicles, and "live" their lives in peace.

As the security program designed to watch over the city, it's our task to protect the inhabitants. Suddenly, an intruder alert lights up our sensors. We rev up a light cycle and silently tear across the digital landscape. As the assailant comes into view, we vault from the bike and it disappears in a flash. Jumping onto a nearby wall and running across it, we leap and hurl our disc at the virus-soldier. It spins wildly, slamming into him, bouncing off, and rebounding again for a second hit. Like some kind of virtual parkour gymnast, we bound across the landscape mincing up our opponent until he flickers into the emptiness.

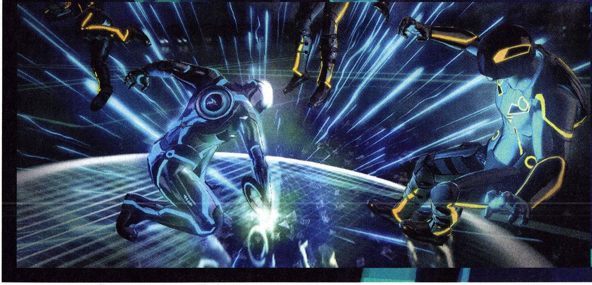
Welcome to *Tron Evolution.*

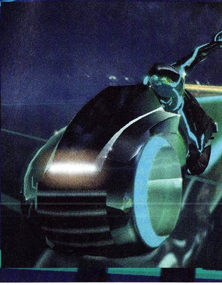
One world

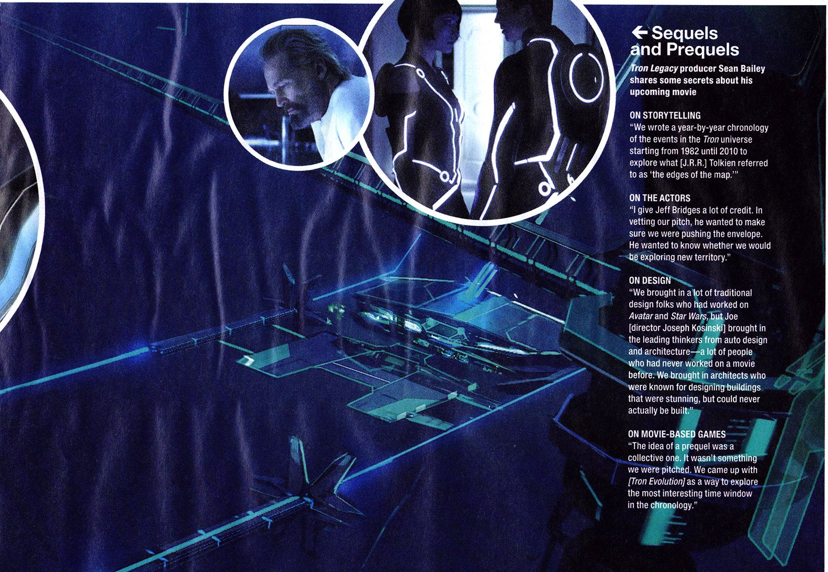
First there was *Tron,* the movie. You *may* have heard of it. The 1982 original Disney film was both a technological breakthrough and a pioneering foray into the little-explored realm of computers and videogames.

Disney is currently producing the movie sequel, *Tron Legacy,* and Propaganda Games *(Turok, Pirates of the Caribbean)* is developing the accompanying game, *Tron Evolution.* The film hits theaters December 17, with the game shipping about a month prior to the movie's release. *Tron Legacy's* storyline is a direct sequel to the original motion picture, but *Tron Evolution,* although created in conjunction with the new film, spins a completely different story arc set 20 years prior to the events in *Tron Legacy.*

Propaganda began working on its third-person action-adventure game in January 2009, parallelling the







← Sequels and Prequels

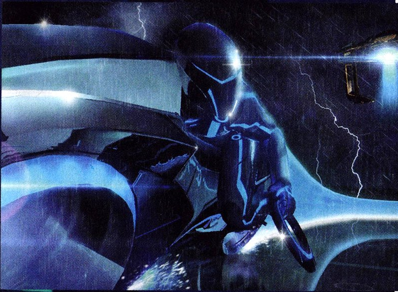
***Tron Legacy* producer Sean Bailey shares some secrets about his upcoming movie**

ON STORYTELLING
"We wrote a year-by-year chronology of the events in the *Tron* universe starting from 1982 until 2010 to explore what [J.R.R.] Tolkien referred to as 'the edges of the map.'"

ON THE ACTORS
"I give Jeff Bridges a lot of credit. In vetting our pitch, he wanted to make sure we were pushing the envelope. He wanted to know whether we would be exploring new territory."

ON DESIGN
"We brought in a lot of traditional design folks who had worked on *Avatar* and *Star Wars*, but Joe [director Joseph Kosinski] brought in the leading thinkers from auto design and architecture—a lot of people who had never worked on a movie before. We brought in architects who were known for designing buildings that were stunning, but could never actually be built."

ON MOVIE-BASED GAMES
"The idea of a prequel was a collective one. It wasn't something we were pitched. We came up with *[Tron Evolution]* as a way to explore the most interesting time window in the chronology."



movie's production—a fact Disney emphasizes to head off preconceived notions of movie-licensed suckitude. The movie and game studio share everything—art assets, actors (including Olivia Wilde as Quorra), story timelines, weaponry, vehicles—you name it.

The game puts us in the role of Anon (short for anonymous), a powerful computer program that patrols and protects Tron City—and who faces off against Abraxis, a potent virus designed to destroy the city. Behind Abraxis, however, is something even more sinister…

Future combat

Evolution's action is divided roughly down the middle, with 60 percent of the single-player campaign on foot and 40 percent on a light cycle. As for the combat itself, *Evolution* aims to offer something wholly original—a mix of parkour acrobatic action reminiscent of James Bond-flick *Casino Royale's* opening scene and the rhythmic fighting style of Capoeira, a South American dance-influenced martial art.

In essence, this means Anon will be leaping off his light cycle, bounding off walls, attacking enemies in mid-air, all the while slinging his ricocheting disc (a key weapon in the original movie) through the thick of it. As Anon progresses, he'll add new attacks to his combat repertoire.

Along with the disc (which records data about defeated enemies), the redesigned light cycle can now roam off the right-angle grids from the original film, setting us free to navigate vertical slopes, bridges, and canyons. The cycle's light tail is still a weapon—and Disney hinted at possible vehicular weapon upgrades, too. Fans of the original film will also enjoy seeing new designs for the Solar Sail and the ominous enemy vessel, the Recognizer. | Douglass C. Perry

UFC UNDISPUTED 2010

Can the heavyweight champ defend its title?

PS3 **AVAILABLE:** May **GENRE:** Fighting **PUBLISHER:** THQ **DEVELOPER:** Yuke's Osaka

Destruction might seem natural when talking about mixed martial arts—but it's less appealing when you're a game developer. That's why it was so intriguing to hear producer Neven Dravinski share his thoughts on *UFC Undisputed 2010.*

"We sat in a room and said, 'How can we destroy the 2009 offering?'"

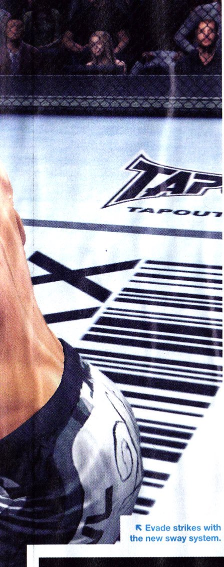
Keep in mind that *UFC 2009: Undisputed* was critically acclaimed and went on to sell millions of copies. With that kind of recent success, it woud be easy enough for THQ to rest on its laurels and lightly iterate on its winning formula. So the fact that they're digging back in to refine—and redefine—the existing experience is like a brutal punch in the face. And we mean that in a good way.

Fluid fisticuffs

Using the Ultimate Fighting Championship's slogan of "As Real As It Gets" as a development mantra, THQ and developer Yuke's Osaka focused their efforts on enhancing the combat, addressing concerns that last year's action wasn't fluid enough to match the real deal. *Undisputed 2010's* action looks noticeably faster than last year's game, which Dravinski says wasn't just a matter of speeding up maneuvers, but rather changing things from the system level and eliminating preset animations that took control away from players.

With the predefined combos out, *we* now decide how to dominate our opponent. "The onus is on you to figure out which combos translate better in each situation," explains Dravinski.

↗ **Enhanced cage positions give fresh options against the wall.**

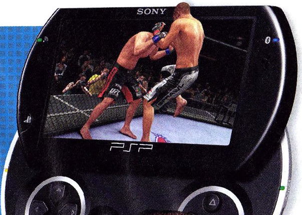


↖ Evade strikes with the new sway system.

> “Mix and match moves from various fighting disciplines, including new additions karate, Sambo, and Greco-Roman wrestling.”

→ Portable Powerhouse?

Unlike last year’s game, *UFC Undisputed 2010* will also arrive on PSP, though its release is scheduled for later in the year. The PSP version aims to offer the same comprehensive fighting experience, but with reworked controls to compensate for the PSP’s single analog stick configuration. “We’re working to make it the best UFC experience possible for the PSP,” promises producer Neven Dravinski.



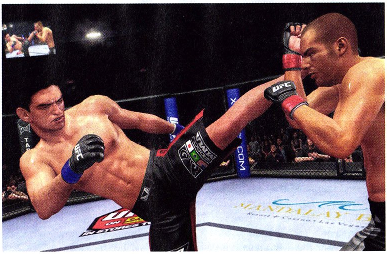
A litany of other combat improvements are also in the cards for *2010,* including a sway system that lets us move our head and upper body to dodge attacks; enhanced targeting and ground combat; new submission moves and cage-based actions; and the introduction of the southpaw stance—a feature sorely lacking from *UFC 2009.* THQ hopes this adds up to a fighting experience that not only handily trumps its predecessor, but keeps the mixed-martial-arts faithful from even considering impending competitor *EA Sports MMA.*

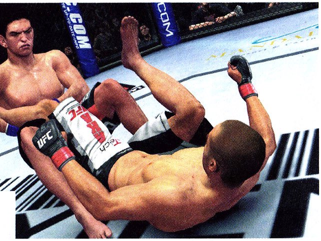
Invest well

More than 100 real-life fighters will make the cut in *UFC Undisputed 2010.* Cover athlete Brock Lesnar leads a comprehensive group of participants, including newcomers Kimbo Slice and Paulo Thiago, as well as holdovers like Mike Swick and Chuck Liddell. While about half of the combatants in *2009* were constructed using the game’s create-a-fighter feature, this time around every fighter has been built from the ground up in a photorealistic manner.

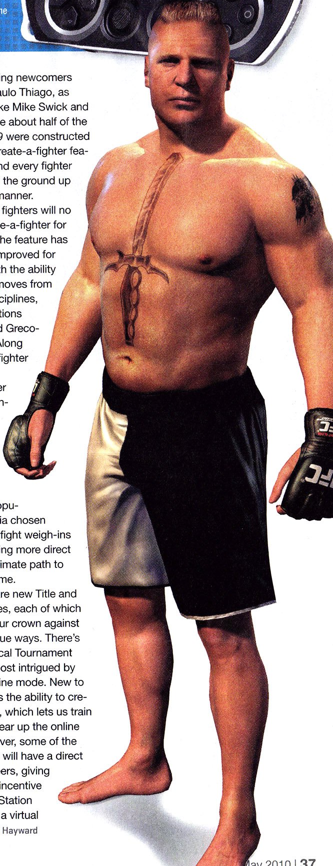
Though licensed fighters will no longer rely on create-a-fighter for their digital mugs, the feature has been significantly improved for players in *2010,* with the ability to mix and match moves from various fighting disciplines, including new additions karate, Sambo, and Greco-Roman wrestling. Along with the improved fighter capabilities comes an enhanced Career mode, which Dravinski promises will inspire “a lot more emotional investment in your fighter.” There’s now an ability to boost a fighter’s popularity in the game via chosen actions during pre-fight weigh-ins and interviews, giving more direct control over our ultimate path to the UFC Hall of Fame.

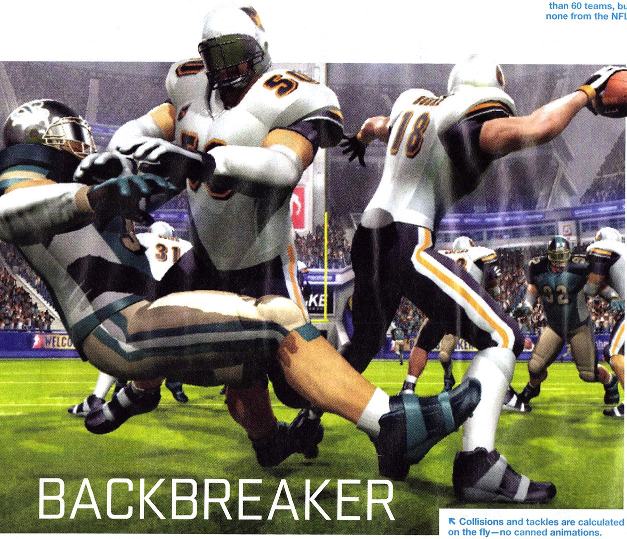
Also in the mix are new Title and Title Defense modes, each of which will let us defend our crown against challengers in unique ways. There’s also a 16-player local Tournament mode, but we’re most intrigued by the overhauled online mode. New to *Undisputed 2010* is the ability to create fighting camps, which lets us train with our pals and tear up the online community. Moreover, some of the online functionality will have a direct impact on our careers, giving everyone an extra incentive to hop on the PlayStation Network to deliver a virtual beatdown. | Andrew Hayward





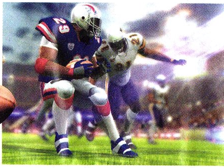
↗ New submission moves can quickly turn the tide of battle.





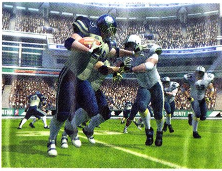
BACKBREAKER

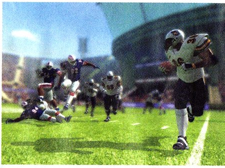
↖ Collisions and tackles are calculated on the fly—no canned animations.



➔ There are more than 60 teams, but none from the NFL.

↓ The robust customization system was used to create the team logo designs in the game.





Playing for the upset

PS3 AVAILABLE: May GENRE: Sports PUBLISHER: 505 Games DEVELOPER: NaturalMotion

How much do you love football? Not the NFL and its star athletes, not NCAA Division I ball with its beloved teams—not even the Canadian Football League. Would the sport itself be enough without all the personality and spectacle of real-world competition? We're about to find out.

Performing our preseason analysis, *Backbreaker* seems a bit outgunned from the get-go. It's taking on the powerhouse *Madden* franchise, it doesn't have *any* league or player licenses, and it's an *American* football game with a *UK* development team. Who came up with this game plan? It seems insane—and yet, there may be some method to the madness.

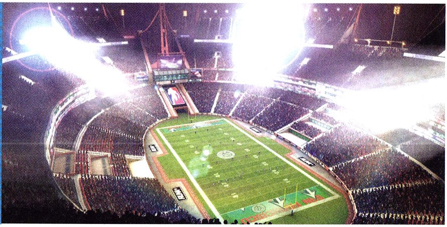
Backbreaker looks to challenge the *Madden* dynasty with innovative approaches to view perspective and game controls. The camera is lower and closer to the ball carrier than in traditional football games—like a blend of Skycam and field-level Steadicam views from TV broadcasts. While the third-person perspective is retained, the new effect is akin to being in a player's shoes: The quarterback must spot open receivers between the outstretched arms of oncoming rushers, and detecting holes for the running back requires vision and anticipation.

Control inputs are primarily tied to the dual analog sticks, eliminating the need for complex stick/button combinations. During pass plays, the Left-stick is used to maneuver the QB and scan the field for receivers, with a quick downward-cock of the Right-stick and upward-throw motion sending the ball on its way. Open-field runners execute special moves by mimicking motions via the Left-stick—a spin move requires a circular sweep, for instance.

Offensively, the system worked well in our brief hands-on session, but there are trade-offs: The more intimate camera angle means a limited field-of-view, making it tougher to spot approaching tacklers. On defense, developer NaturalMotion is relying on a camera AI system that automatically switches to the player best situated to make a play—tricky business to say the least. But if it works, football fans will be closer to the action than ever and *Backbreaker* may indeed be *in the game.* | Roger Burchill

➔ This Is *Our* House

The upside to lacking official licenses is that NaturalMotion isn't obligated to faithfully recreate real-world stadiums. All of the venues in *Backbreaker* sprouted from the devs' imagination and reflect local design influences from the team's city. The San Francisco stadium we saw had a recreation of the Golden Gate Bridge behind one end zone, making us feel quite at home.



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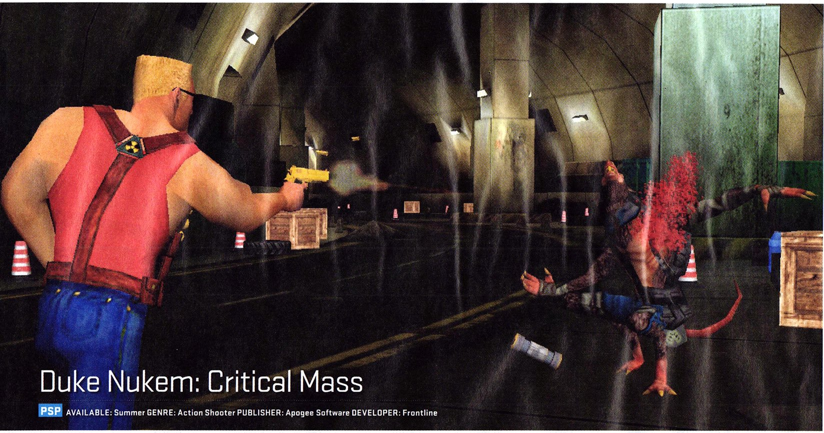

Duke Nukem: Critical Mass

PSP AVAILABLE: Summer GENRE: Action Shooter PUBLISHER: Apogee Software DEVELOPER: Frontline

Duke Nukem is being released! Well, not the Duke you've been expecting for the past decade. *Critical Mass* is the first installment of a third-person *Duke Nukem* trilogy, featuring ol' Duke time-traveling to kick ass in a future that's wholly dystopian. Since the *Mass* isn't being made by 3D Realms, we can actually expect to play the game sometime soon. | David Murphy

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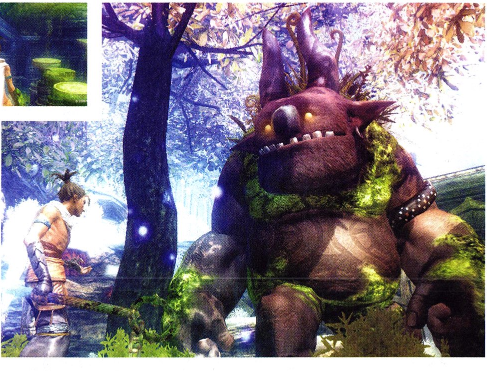
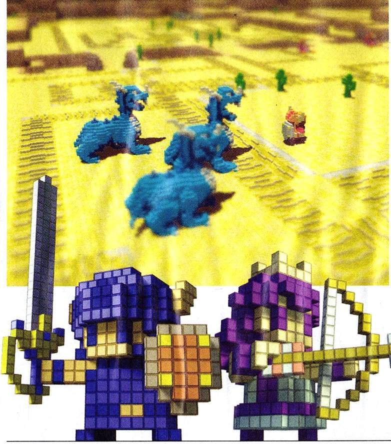
Majin and the Forsaken Kingdom

PS3 AVAILABLE: Summer GENRE: Action Adventure PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai DEVELOPER: Game Republic

The touching story of a young man and his monster, *Majin and the Forsaken Kingdom* drops us into a wrecked world that wants restoration. We take the role of the boy while the creature Majin is controlled by artificial intelligence—work together to solve puzzles, smash stuff but good, and save the day. As we progress through the story, Majin's abilities will be augmented and his mysterious origin shall be revealed. | Greg Orlando





3D Dot Game Heroes

PS3 AVAILABLE: May GENRE: Action Adventure PUBLISHER: Atlus DEVELOPER: Silicon Studio

We're not the type to indulge in sepia-toned sojourns down memory lane, but this retro-styled gem might just have us skipping merrily down a path to the past. Whether it's homage or straight-up theft, *Dot* takes everything we loved about some of our favorite NES and SNES games *(Zelda,* in particular), and refashions it in a blocky-yet-beautiful adventure. An all-too-brief session left us craving a return to the Dotnia Kingdom, where we'll be swinging our sword, tossing our boomerang, exploding our bombs, and whipping our slingshot while exploring the puzzle-packed dungeons and absurd overworld. | Gary Steinman

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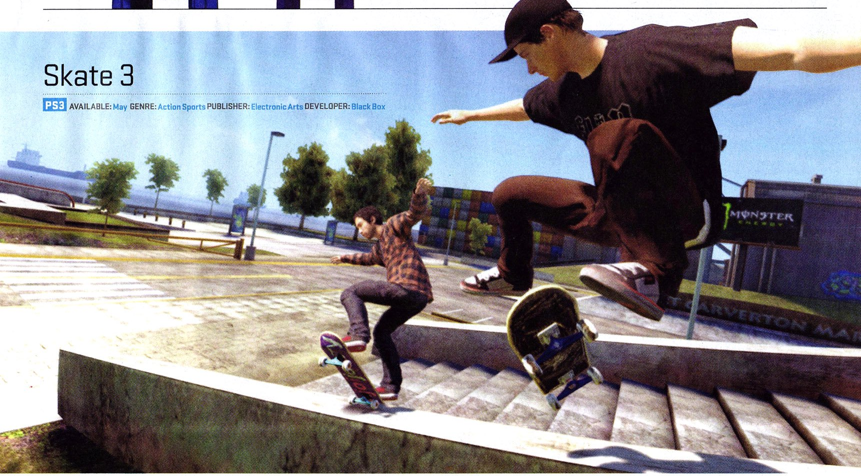
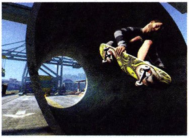
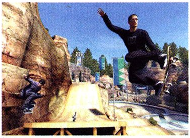


Skate 3

PS3 AVAILABLE: May GENRE: Action Sports PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Black Box

We knew we could design our own skate parks in *Skate 3.* What we *didn't* know is that we could place any object, anywhere in the game world, at any time. Need a landing ramp to manage a huge drop? With a couple of simple commands, we magically conjured exactly what we needed to land the killer gap of our dreams. We had an absolute blast putting this new tool to good use in a recent visit to *Skate 3's* all-new city, Port Carverton (less realistic but certainly more skateable than the previous game's San Vanelona). The game ignores physical limitations, but the controls are tighter than ever and we're happy to be along for the ride. | Scott Butterworth





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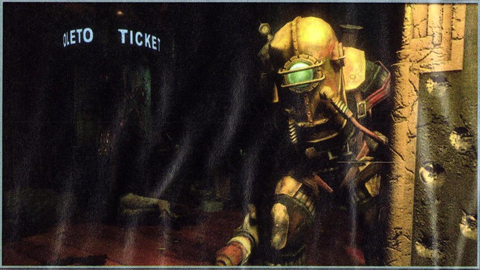
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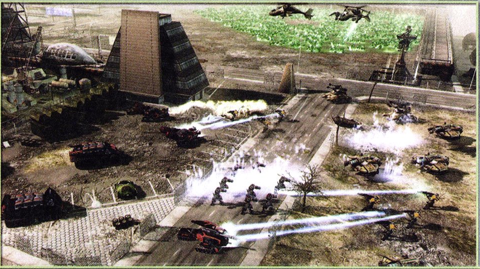

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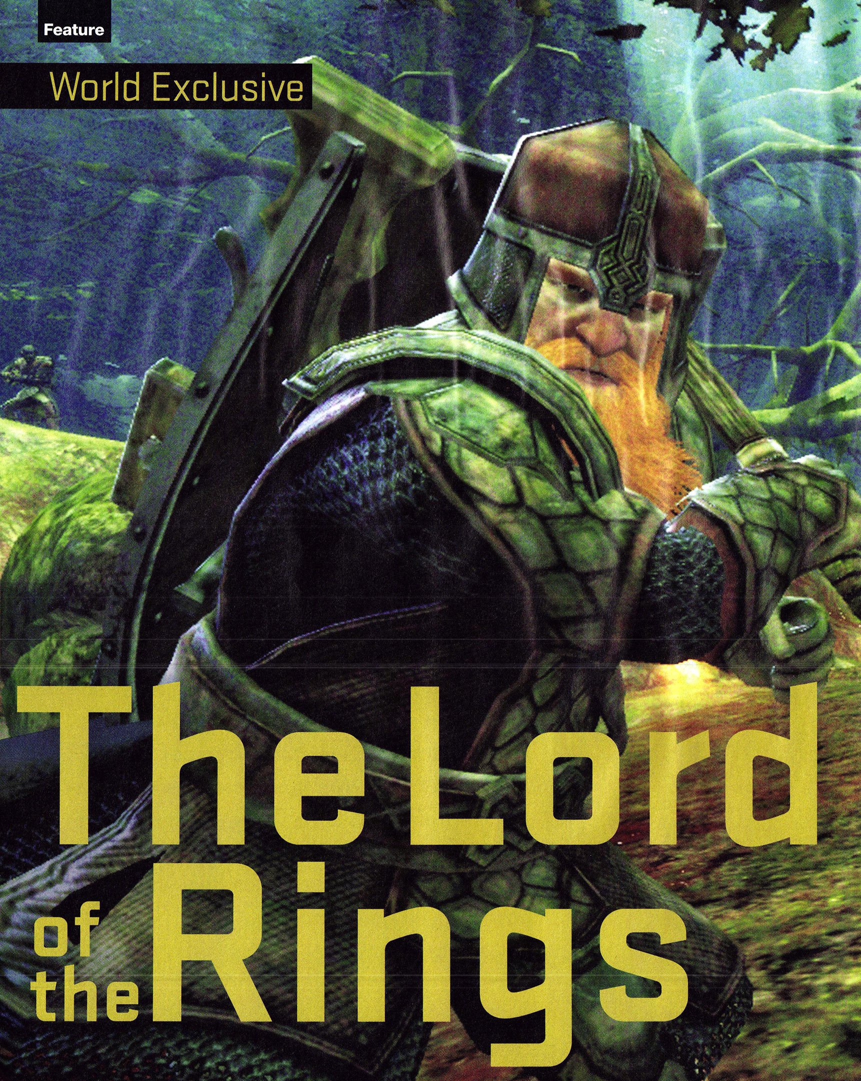
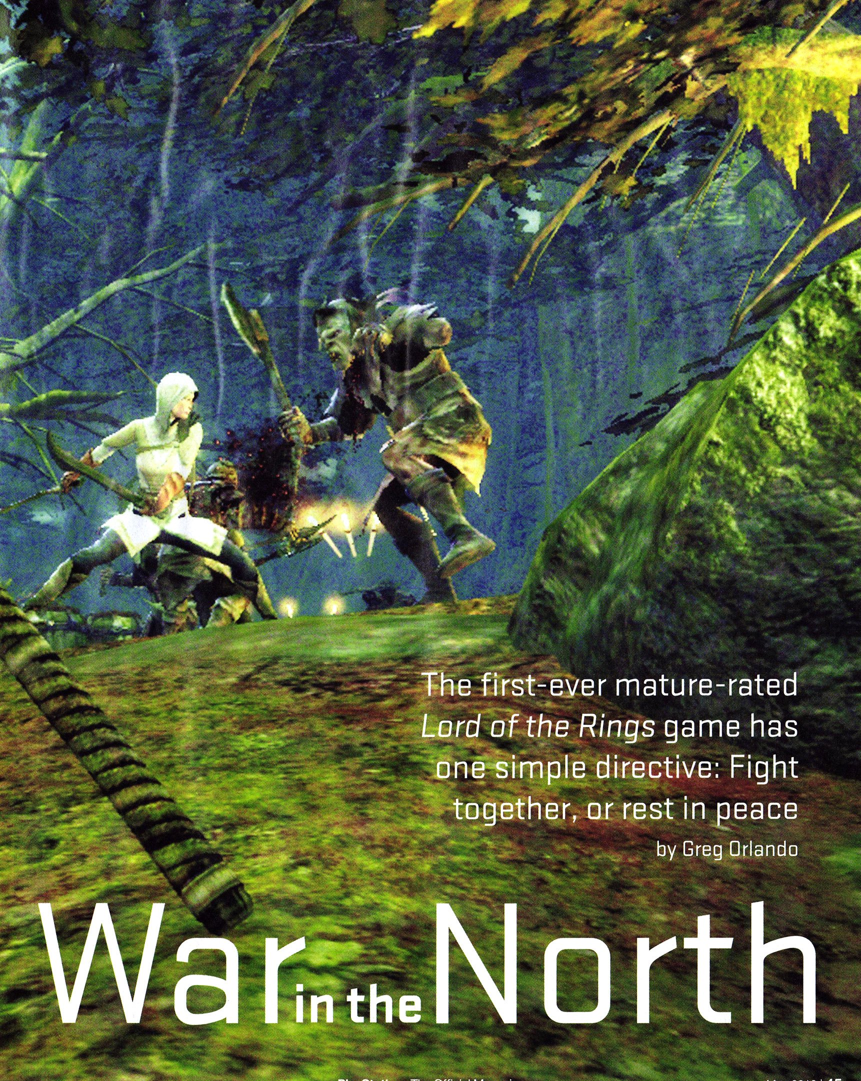


The Lord of the Rings



War in the North

The first-ever mature-rated *Lord of the Rings* game has one simple directive: Fight together, or rest in peace

by Greg Orlando

"WE'RE STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF A GENIUS," Ryan Geithman says.

That's all well and good, but today is game day at Snowblind Studios, and Geithman has hijacked a TV to show off his company's new action role-playing game *The Lord of the Rings: War in the North.* Now, two TVs sit side-by-side at the head of a good-sized conference room, and are being played simultaneously by Geithman and the game's producer, Jessica Burnelle.

This is cause for some concern among the developers, especially today. Game day is celebrated across all three Warner Bros.-owned studios in the Seattle, Wash., area. On this glorious day, workers from Geithman's Snowblind, as well as those from Monolith Studios and Surreal Entertainment, get to stop what they're doing and celebrate life—with games of all kinds. Pizza, "a mighty pile," as Burnelle says, is shipped in.

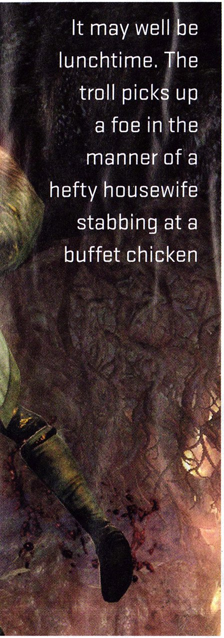
The second TV, then, should be elsewhere. For now, however, it's serving up *War in the North.* It seems a perfectly excellent use for a TV, and like the poet says, there will be time, there will be time. Later, when the demonstration is done, the TV will be whisked away with some urgency. Game day doesn't happen every day, after all, and the TV is needed to further the cause.

A RINGING SENSATION

War in the North is Snowblind Studios' first big-budget title. The company started off doing racing titles—one of which was inaugurated with a napkin-written contract—but Geithman says, "We don't really like racing games that much."

Action-laden RPGs followed. The company tackled the *EverQuest* universe with *Champions of Norrath* and *Champions: Return to Arms*, and DC comic-book mainstays with *Justice League Heroes*. All these have channeled Snowblind directly to John Ronald Ruel Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* novels, what Geithman affectionately calls "the pinnacle of nerddom."

"What are we going to do that's different?" Geithman posed this question to himself and Snowblind's development team. *The Lord of the Rings* is fertile ground for electronic



> It may well be lunchtime. The troll picks up a foe in the manner of a hefty housewife stabbing at a buffet chicken

entertainment, and Snowblind didn't care to rehash what had gone before. *War in the North* will be the first mature-rated *Lord of the Rings* game. More importantly, it will be the first *Rings*-themed game to put its emphasis on cooperative play.

"If you do not work together, you will die," Geithman says. *War in the North* allows for three-man adventuring parties, and players will get to create their own heroes. The idea here is to forge at least a mini-fellowship, with the triumvirate working together to defeat whatever's thrown at them.

With the caveats that *War in the North* won't see release until 2011, and Snowblind has yet to finalize any of this, it will be possible to play as a dwarf, human, or elf, with mage, warrior, and scout specializations. Individual characters can be personalized with a series of slider bars, and character progression keeps in tune with standard RPG mechanics. As a hero gains experience, he'll be able to augment abilities, learn new spells, and become increasingly resilient to death.

War in the North supports single-player games with two artificial intelligence-controlled characters. Multiplayer games support two or three humans and online drop-in/drop-out, meaning players can come and go as they please without ruining the adventure for others. A scaling mechanism will help neophyte heroes join forces with battle-hardened veterans, with item-swapping among the heroes and other as-yet-unspecified elements designed to discourage a "me first" style of play.

As the directive "cooperate or die" is not just a throwaway comment for the game's features list, Geithman stresses the AI bots will have to be well behaved. More importantly, they must be smart, as Geithman is unsure if his game will include an option to modify computer-controlled characters' battle tactics.

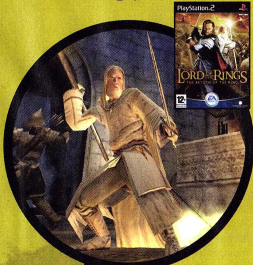
NO SLEEP TILL MIRKWOOD

The war in the north, as a concept, is only briefly touched on in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* novels. It's barely mentioned in director Peter Jackson's film adaptions, and only Electronic Arts' real-time strategy *The Lord of the Rings*: *The Battle for Middle-earth II* tackled the subject in videogame form.

So this is an opportunity to expand into uncharted territory. "People will get to explore parts [of Middle-earth] they haven't seen before," Geithman says. Although the game will feature

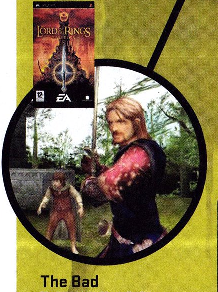
Three Ring Circus

The Lord of the Electronic Rings: Good, Bad, and Ugly



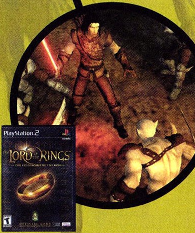
The Good

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King
PS2 | 2003 A fine third-person action game, *LOTR: The Return of the King* served up a banquet of crazy battle scenes (Minas Tirith, the Black Gates) and eight playable characters including the delightful scamps Samwise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins.



The Bad

The Lord of the Rings: Tactics
PSP | 2005 *LOTR: Tactics* is what happens when someone needs to pay off his mortgage. Released early in the PSP's lifecycle, *Tactics* proved to be predictable, slow-paced, and dull as a sermon from a disinterested preacher.



The Ugly

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring | PS2 | 2002 We quote: "If there was any truth in advertising, Universal would hawk this game as 'Lord of the Pointless Fetch Quest' and recommend that potential buyers seek the Fellowship of Many Beers to dull the pain."

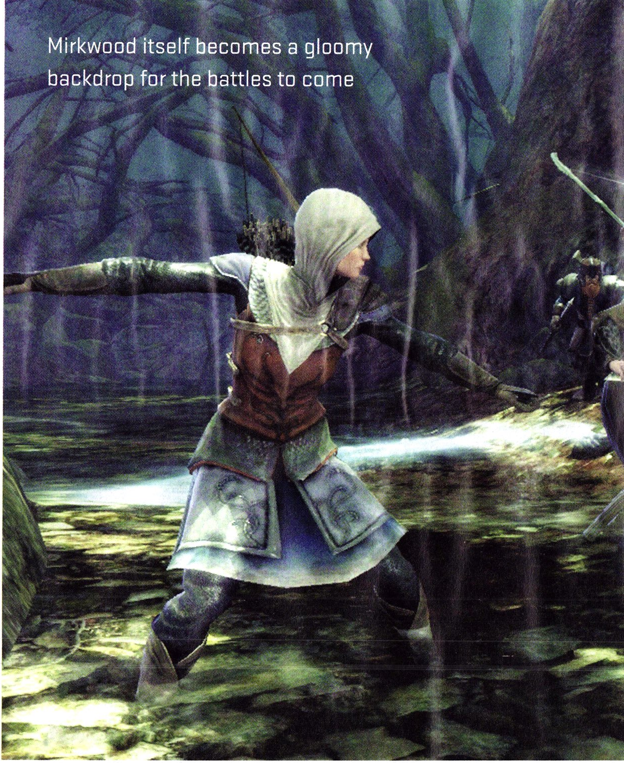
new locations, new heroes, and a central foe beyond the evil Sauron, Snowblind will be keeping its *War in the North* firmly mired in Tolkien's universe. The game is already set within the timeframe of the fellowship of the Ring's trek to Mount Doom. Further, the developer is working with the Saul Zaentz Company (the rights' holder for *The Lord of the Rings* properties) to ensure the game doesn't stray from Tolkien's vision.

"We don't have to pull this out of thin air," Geithman says.

Mirkwood serves as an anchor of sorts for *War in the North.* The decrepit forest with its spiders and wood elves was featured in Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit.* It also highlights what the developers call "touchstone moments," wherein players will get to meet up with characters from the novels. The idea is to start players off in a comfort zone, then begin the process of cutting the cords, Burnelle says. As the story branches off, there will still be relatable and familiar moments, but by and large "you're the hero now," she says.

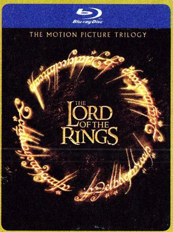
Players are introduced to Mirkwood with a cutscene featuring a battle between Beleram, a giant eagle, and a dragon-esque fell beast. Unfinished, the movie wasn't available for viewing, but it was clear the yellow-eyed Beleram had done well for itself. When play begins in earnest, it stands perched on the corpse of the fell beast, waiting to give players instruction.

It's possible to interact with Beleram and other non-player characters through a dialogue wheel much like the ones featured in BioWare's *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age.* Players can select different responses



Mirkwood itself becomes a gloomy backdrop for the battles to come

Ring Things, Part I



The monstrous nine Blu-ray-disc *The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy* compiles all three Peter Jackson-helmed *Lord of the Rings* films. Included are the original (not extended) versions of all three movies, digital copies for each film, game trailers, documentaries, music videos, behind-the-scenes previews, and much, much, but not too much, more.

↗ Available April 6 for a very respectable $99.98.

on the wheel, some of which will advance the story and others that will give more detail about the world, including hints as to sub-quests. In the BioWare games, responses are also linked to basic morality choices, but this won't be the case here. Tolkien's world is largely binary; the adventurers are all heroes. "There's not necessarily moral ambiguity," the game's executive producer Larry Paolicelli says.

Back in Mirkwood, Beleram informs the adventurers that they must find a wizard. "There are evil things about," one of the adventurers notes soberly. "We'd best keep our guard up."

Indeed. Wolf-like wargs lounging on fallen trees serve as an advanced warning system, howling to alert a series of orcs. As the heroes draw closer to danger, war drums begin to hammer.

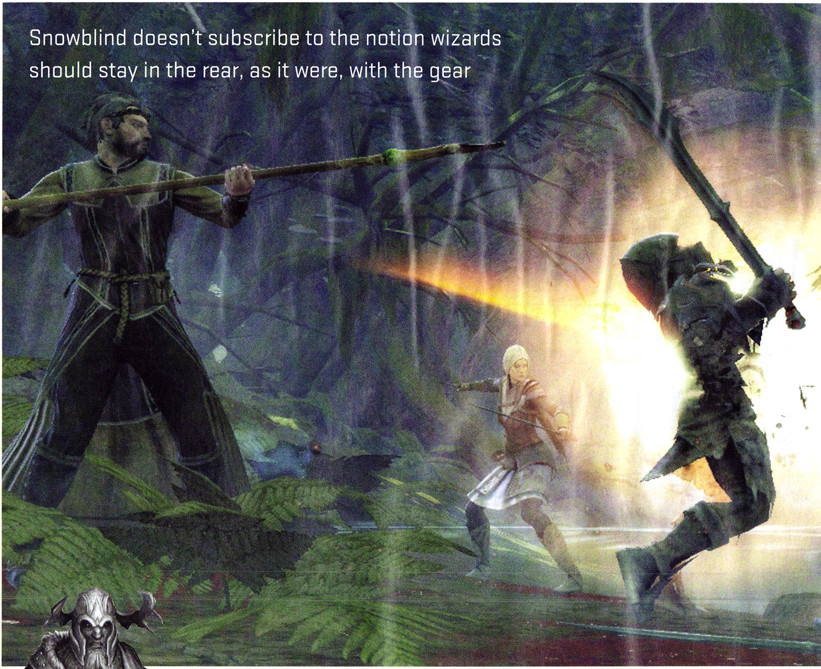
ORCHESTRATED ATTACKS

The stage has been set, and Mirkwood itself becomes a gloomy backdrop for the battles to come. There's a hint the place was once idyllic, as sunlight pokes through between the trees and provides gentle lighting. Now, however, there's a sense of claustrophobia with tightly packed woods, a compact path to travel, and lots of toppled overgrowth looming above the adventurers' heads.

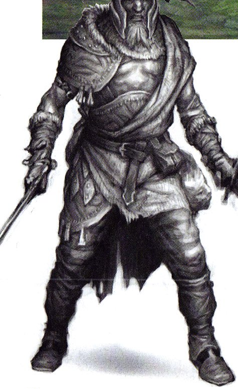
Battles highlight Snowblind's notion of interdependence and the need for cooperative play. Mages can create a protective translucent bubble (blue-tinged for the good guys, red for the evil sorcerers), and their allies can take refuge within its boundaries. A "mending light" spell upgrade allows characters inside the bubble to be healed and it's possible to fire arrows, crossbow bolts, and spells outward in relative safety. Scouts possess limited invisibility, allowing them to approach enemies to either get in a few quick-and-dirty sneak attacks, or simply lure a target back to a more defensible spot. In combat, warriors can bellow to attract enemies, thus drawing fire away from other team members.

Working together, a team can flank its enemies or assault them en masse from a shielded position. The flank attack may prove beneficial against larger foes; a partially completed character animation on a dev's computer shows a scout clambering on a troll's back and stabbing it in the shoulder blades with two small swords. It might also be smart to lure enemies to a mage's protective bubble before it's dissipated—the bubbles can be augmented to create a damaging explosion when they lose cohesion.

Each member of an adventuring party will have a role to play, and the game seems flexible enough to let players define the roles. Games have traditionally treated magic users as wimpy, dainty things, but Snowblind doesn't subscribe to the notion that wizards should stay *in the rear,* as it were, *with the gear.* "They have things that make you feel as powerful as a warrior," Burnelle says about mages. After all, *The Lord of the Rings* had its Battle of the Peak in which the wizard Gandalf fought a demonic Balrog



Snowblind doesn't subscribe to the notion wizards should stay in the rear, as it were, with the gear



singlehandedly for two days and nights before dying.

Traveling underground, dwarven characters will be able to use their special abilities to aid the team. Dwarves are miners in Tolkien's lore, and in *War in the North* they can spot hidden chambers their human and elven compatriots can't see. Glowing rune-covered walls demand smashing to gain entrance to these secret rooms and—lo and behold!—there are goodies to be found.

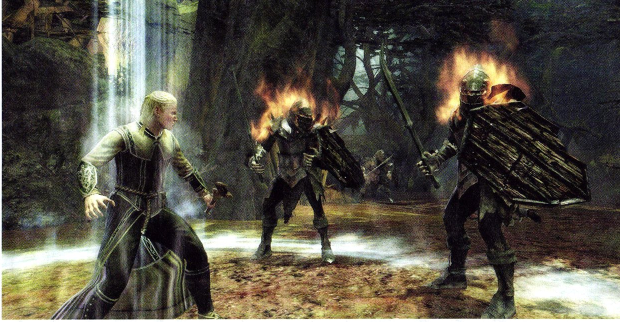
"At all times you have to work together," Geithman reiterates, as the on-screen heroes come upon a green-and-gray skinned troll roughly the size of Trenton, New Jersey. The troll carries a huge, spiked stone club and will, at times, pick up a huge boulder to hurl at the adventurers. Flanking the lumbering troll is relatively easy, but the thing is a tank with legs. Killing it will take some time. And skill.

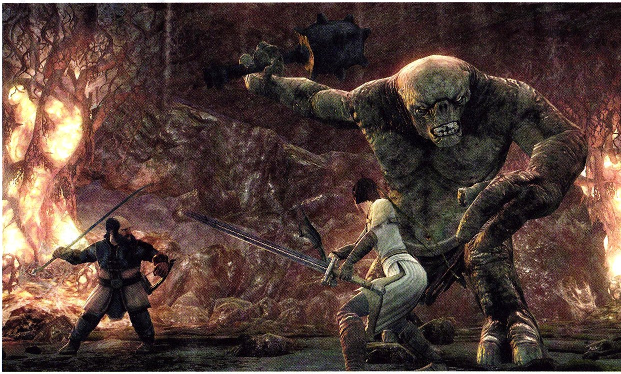
It may well be lunchtime. The troll grabs at the dwarf in the manner of a hefty housewife stabbing at a buffet chicken at a Las Vegas all-you-can-eat. The dwarf falls on his back and uses his legs to fend off the troll; players are prompted to press a controller button repeatedly to avoid a horrible fate. An adventurer trapped thusly can escape by himself, but it's far easier to be rescued by an ally.

Teamwork takes a hit here. The troll picks up the dwarf with a meaty hand and begins slamming it repeatedly with the club. Just as players will be able to perform special finishing moves, so can their enemies. Another unfinished animation on a developer's computer shows this same enormous troll shoving an enemy's head in its mouth, biting down, chewing briefly, severing the head from the body at the neck, and then spitting out the remains.

The team further slows its enormous adversary with ice-based spells and, after much abuse, the troll falls face-first onto the ground. Working together pays off, and neither Burnelle nor Geithman gets to show off the game's revival mechanic in which a fallen friend (provided he has a head) may be resuscitated.

"We were too good to be killed," Burnelle says.





FRED, THE MONSTER GUY

It's true. Fred is the monster guy. "Any time we need somebody scary, Fred's the guy," Phil Straub, Snowblind's art director says. Fred is Fred Pashe, character artist, and it seems he does make an awesomely imposing monster. On his screen is an armored, three-fingered beast meant to highlight the game's ability to render, well, *scariness.* As Pashe shows off his creation, lead character artist Joel Blakely notes that what's seen on screen will be what appears in the game. There will be no compromises between the game's PlayStation 3 and PC versions, and multiple assurances are made that *War in the North* is console focused.

Nearby, animator Amy Drobek shows unfinished video sequences featuring adventurers getting their heads bitten off, giant spiders crawling over victims before impaling them with their fangs, dwarven heroes bludgeoning orcs with their fists, and an elf performing an acrobatic assassination. The message is clear: *Mature rating, here Snowblind comes*.

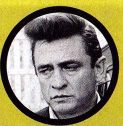
Wall-hung artwork hints at what's in store for players: A snow-covered series of mountain peaks with a village carved into it, a huge troll wearing a skull as a cap, and a warg perched on a fallen tree. There's been some real effort placed into these images and, later, when an anatomy reference figure (naked male in all his muscled glory) shows up on Blakely's desk, it's clear to see Snowblind isn't cutting any corners. It's still a ways off, and hyperbole serves no one, but this may well be a war to at least end some or, perhaps, most wars. ■

Ring Things, Part II

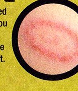
← Ring Pops
Fuels our endless vanity while maintaining our excessive girth. *It's candy you wear.*

↙ Mood rings
Not the one true ring, but a thermometer of sorts worn on the finger to indicate you just blew $10 on a novelty item. It changes color to green when you're about to turn into the Incredible Hulk.

Ring of Fire →
Song written by June Cash and popularized by Johnny Cash. Anthemic ballad about the inherent nature of love or discomfort of venereal disease, it is uncertain which.



Ringworm ↘
Skin infection caused by fungus. Places you don't want to get it will often include the groin, nails, and feet.



← Ringolevio
Childhood game combining elements of tag and hide-and-seek involving jails, imprisonment, and remembering that time Andy Dufresne nearly got killed by the screws but instead ended up sitting in the shade while we drank warm beers on the Shawshank correctional facility's roof.

ARTISTIC STATEMENTS

Subtitle
emphasizing
extremeness
of game.

THE BOX ART NEVER LIES, RIGHT? We judge 10 PS2 games solely on their covers—then actually play them. The results are surprising. **BY MITCH DYER**

MISSED IT! = Our first feelings based on the box art didn't match the game's quality at all.

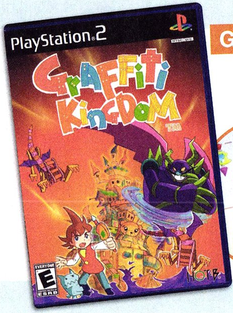
NAILED IT! = Our initial impression of the box art closely resembled the games quality.

SPLASHDOWN: RIDES GONE WILD

THE BOX Whoever put this cover image together knew how to get our blood pumping. If escaping an exploding pirate ship by piloting a Sea-Doo with one hand isn't the definition of extreme, then numerous men's magazines have lied to us. If the cover is indicative of anything, it's that *Splashdown* is having a lot of fun with itself. We're stoked to get in on that one-handed action.

THE VERDICT We expected to enjoy *Splashdown: Rides Gone Wild's* absurdity, but the box doesn't do the game justice. It's even more preposterous than we imagined (we didn't expect to race dinosaurs) and astonishingly awesome. For a game released in 2003, *Splashdown* holds up remarkably well. It's essentially *SSX* on jet skis, which is good enough in itself, but the course radically changes with each new lap. Explosions open up alternate routes, fallen objects block paths, and big events, like a fighter plane shooting up the water, force you to stay on your toes.

NAILED IT!



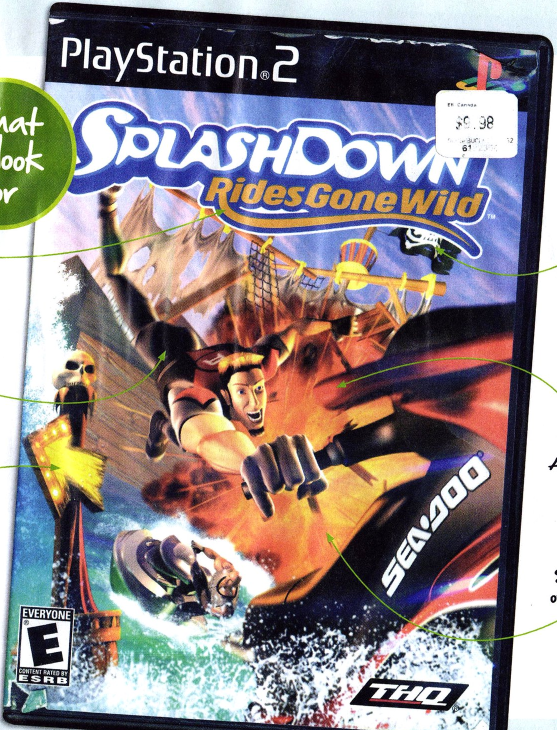
GRAFFITI KINGDOM

THE BOX We wouldn't even try to cook up a cover as lame as *Graffiti Kingdom's.* In the foreground, the hero is waving his paintbrush like it's a sword. His nemesis is a purple robot with horns and a tornado for a torso. Behind them, a castle drawn in crayon is overflowing with teddy bears and cuckoo clocks. We're expecting a trashy adventure game for five-year-olds.

THE VERDICT Despite being a generic platformer with weak combat, *Graffiti Kingdom* is one of the most creative games we've ever played. Its complex character creator lets you build your own heroes in a 3D editor. Our first few characters were super-simple and predictably immature, but as we became proficient with the editor we were recreating our favorite comic book heroes and whipping up original and wacky protagonists. Combat and exploration is infinitely better when you're beating up baddies as your own custom creation, to the point where a mediocre adventure game becomes a gem that's begging for a sequel.

MISSED IT!

What to look for


PlayStation 2
Splashdown
Rides Gone Wild
EB Canada
$9.98
EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
SEA-DOO
THQ

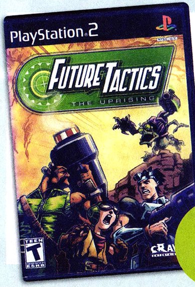
Frozen moment of impossible (or fatal) physics.

'Do the Dew!' dude totally disregarding the directional sign

Pirates, guns, and/or pirates holding guns.

Extreme Awesomeness

Speed lines or explosions?

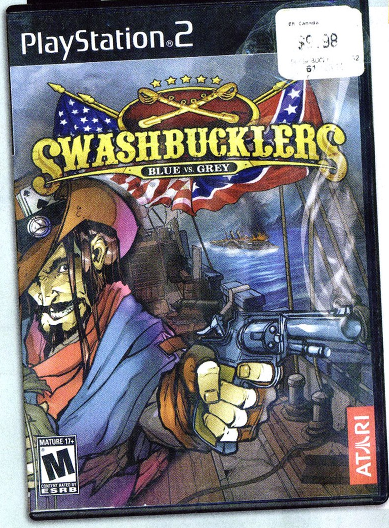

PlayStation 2
Future Tactics
THE UPRISING
TEEN
T
ESRB

FUTURE TACTICS: THE UPRISING

THE BOX This macho rendition of a *Charlie's Angels* pose would fit right at home on the front of a late-'80s comic book cover. We're especially partial to the fella on the left—not only is his handlebar moustache impressive, but he's clearly ready to liquefy that goblin with his car-sized cannon. *Future Tactics* obviously doesn't take itself too seriously, and we're expecting that will bleed into what we assume is turn-based tactics gameplay.

THE VERDICT Are we good, or are we pig-choking *awesome? Future Tactics'* silly dialogue and colorful world exactly reflected or expectations. It also surprised us in a number of ways. While it retains the essence of a turn-based tactics game insofar as it is *turn-based,* we didn't see any of the expected role-playing elements, nor was there any real strategy to be had beyond shooting monsters in the face. Because characters don't have stats, the game focuses on blowing things up. The simplicity will put off genre vets, but the terrain deformation—like blowing up rocks and walls—gives the game extra flair.

NAILED IT!

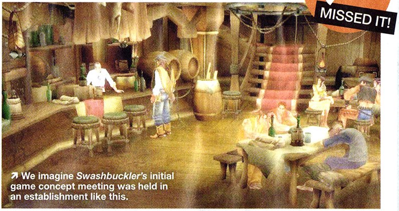


SWASHBUCKLERS: BLUE VS. GREY

THE BOX Swashbuckling during the American Civil War is a hilarious premise, but the art that accompanies the concept has us less than enthusiastic. The poorly drawn cowboy and massive logo almost entirely conceal the pirate ships going at it in the background. This is a messy cover, and we're expecting an equally messy game inside.

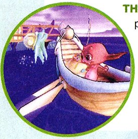
THE VERDICT *Confederates of the Caribbean* would be a more appropriate title for *Swashbucklers* given the amount of seafaring, sword fighting and, er, civil warring going on. If you've ever wondered what the world of *Sid Meier's Pirates!* would be like if Kratos stumbled into it, this is your answer. *Swashbucklers* is a slow burn, but as you level up, unlock new moves, buy new weapons, and complete quests, this role-playing adventure becomes less of a grind and more of an exciting action game. Boarding and burning enemy ships helps break up the Confederate-killing absurdity of this Civil War/pirates/Wild West mishmash.

MISSED IT!


↗ We imagine *Swashbuckler's* initial game concept meeting was held in an establishment like this.

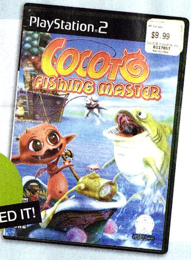
COCOTO FISHING MASTER

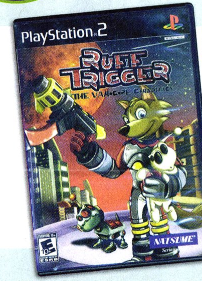
THE BOX There's an immediate sense of remorse as we pull *Cocoto* out of our big bag o' games. Check out the sickeningly cute, bug-eyed demon baby luring a fat fish onto its boat with a similarly bug-eyed baby squid. This is definitely going to be intolerable crap that even a kid with a partial funectomy would hate.



THE VERDICT Well, the cover didn't hold back about its intended audience—the game's ever-present assistant is an embarrassingly adorable cherub of the type usually found in a little girl's toy collection. What the art couldn't prepare us for was the relentlessly tedious fetch-questing and exploration. Shockingly enough, though, *Cocoto Fishing Master* is a competent fishing game. Sailing the sea, switching lures, and casting the line is all we really need to succeed, but we rather enjoyed the rhythmic mini-games that accompany luring each fish to your boat. Since most of the game involves the garbage sailing and side-questing, however, we're going to say we were mostly right.

NAILED IT!



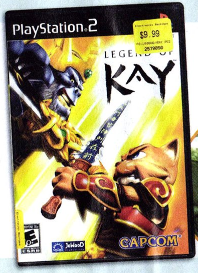


RUFF TRIGGER: THE VANOCORE CONSPIRACY

THE BOX An anthropomorphic, armored animal with a goofy gun? A robot sidekick with a bulbous antenna? To the eyes of a jaded but knowledgable PlayStation gamer, this is an uncomfortably familiar character duo. We're getting some serious *Ratchet & Clank* vibes from this "My First Photoshop" cover image. The flat colors, cluttered background, and basic designs reek of a creatively bankrupt cash-in on another IP.

THE VERDICT To *Ruff Trigger's* credit, it manages to mimic its inspiration fairly well, but like a crummy counterfeit bill this low-rent *Ratchet & Clank* knockoff is easily identified as a worthless imitation. From its health crates and controls to the gadget shop and upgrades, this shameless forgery is a bit too similar to Insomniac's definitive franchise. Where *Ruff* comes up short is with its clunky combat, insufferable voice acting, ugly character models, and bland environments. *Ratchet* consistently charms our pants off, but *Ruff* is a dilapidated mess we don't need. Well, the box tried to warn us.

NAILED IT!



LEGEND OF KAY

THE BOX An armored cat having a swordfight with a gorilla wearing a crown. Let that sink in for a second before we move on. Now that it's fully registered, we're fairly confident that *Legend of Kay* is going to be one of the lamest budget games we've ever played. Despite our imagination telling us that dueling elephants and rhinoceroses is conceptually wonderful, *Kay* looks like a cheap excuse to pit the animal kingdom against one another in a kid-friendly fighting game.

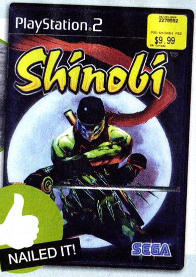
THE VERDICT First off, *Legend of Kay* is not a fighting game. Second, forget our woefully misguided preconceptions. It sure sounds silly, what with the gorilla overlords oppressing the village of cats and all, but we assure you: *Legend of Kay* is an excellent adventure similar to *The Legend of Zelda*. A hotheaded kitten learning kung fu from a drunken swordsman is as awesome as it sounds, and the oodles of clever platforming design and cool combat makes it much better than the baby game we expected it to be.

MISSED IT!

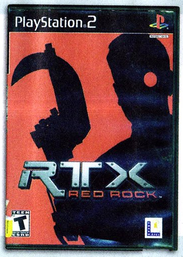
SHINOBI

THE BOX The swirling red scarf and glowing eyes against the massive moon makes for striking imagery, but it's the unabashed notion that "this is a badass ninja" that makes us giddy. We were immediately attracted to the gauntlets, which have a bunch of mean-looking throwing knives jutting out of 'em, and the unorthodox pose with the sideways sword. This ninja's ready to kick butt—and so are we. Our Japanese isn't so hot, but we're willing to bet that *Shinobi* roughly translates to *totally freakin' awesome* in English.

THE VERDICT Remember the part of our impression where we said the ninja looked like a total badass? Well, that's mostly true. *Shinobi* is brutally difficult, so it's pretty easy to make this stylin'-and-profilin' ninja master look like a bumbling buffoon. Once you get into the groove of teleporting around enemies and stringing sweet combos together, however, *Shinobi* is a blissful action game. The precise platforming is also an occasional pain in the neck, but again, the sense of style seeps through and we can't help but love the way everything looks and moves. The flowing red scarf adds even more flair to the ruthlessly challenging combat.



NAILED IT!



RTX: RED ROCK

THE BOX The cover art is vague but unique, so we're anxious to see what *Red Rock* is all about. The black-on-red silhouette art looks great, and the mystery of the monocle has us fascinated. We're also interested in this guy's robotic right arm and super-sized space pistol. As an added bonus, it's an original LucasArts IP, and if it plays anything like *Star Wars Battlefront,* count us in.

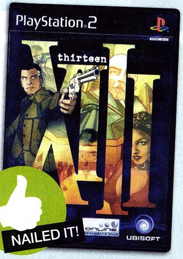
THE VERDICT Ugh. Let's not beat around the bush: *RTX: Red Rock* is total garbage. Even the hero's name is terrible and makes us want to punch the game in the mouth. E. Z. Wheeler? C'mon! Any inkling of potential this game had is buried beneath a mountainous pile of problems that, even given the PS2's limitations, are inexcusable. Moving around cramped hallways or jumping around the canyons of Mars is excruciating because of a broken camera, and the awful shooting isn't enjoyable in any capacity. Oh, and that cool-looking red circle on the box is a lame eyepiece that just makes the bland levels harder to see. We've been had.

MISSED IT!

XIII

THE BOX We're suckers for cel-shaded graphics, and the box art for *XIII* is doing everything it can to show off its cool style. The gentleman with the massive revolver, who we assume is our gray-haired hero, is cleverly wrapped around the colorful, character-filled logo. We're getting serious noir/conspiracy vibes from *XIII,* and fully expect this to be a great shooter.

THE VERDICT Our inner comic fan is freaking out over *XIII*. It separates itself from other first-person shooters by looking like a playable graphic novel. Beyond the cel-shading, we loved the onomatopoeia text blocks popping up alongside the *rata-tat-tat* of a gun. Also cool: seeing animated frames pop into view when we score a sweet headshot and the intriguing amnesiac storyline. This box isn't messin' around—*XIII* oozes quality *and* style.



NAILED IT!

6 NAILED IT!

4 MISSED IT!

We cut it close, but the majority of our assumptions ended up being correct. Ultimately, as our 60 percent success rate indicates, you really can't judge a game by its box art. After all, bad box art isn't necessarily indicative of a bad game.

Brea new grou

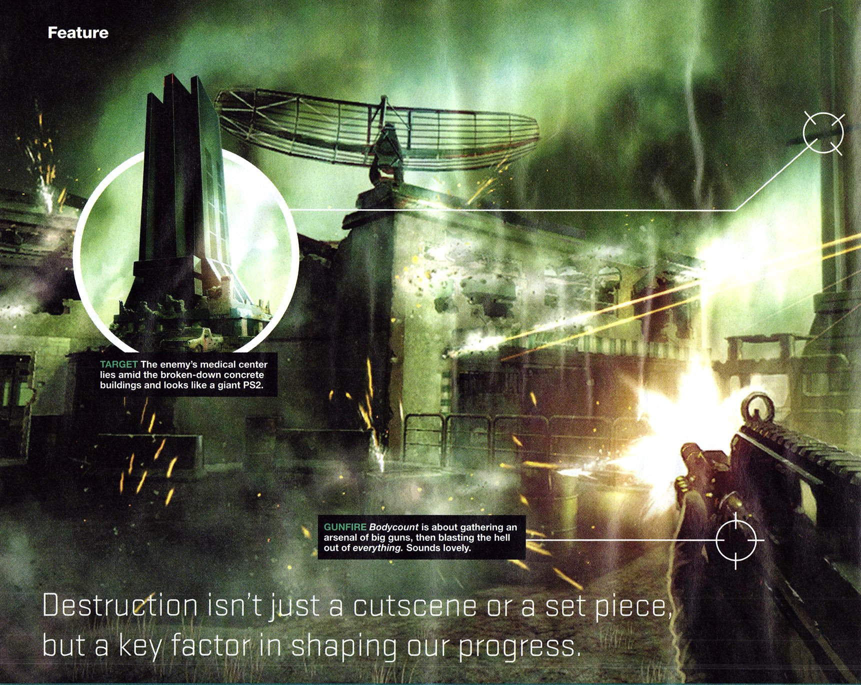
PS3 | AVAILABLE: TBD | PUBLISHER: Codemasters | DEVELOPER: Codemasters Guildford

king

hd

We get an exclusive first hands-on with *Bodycount*, the explosive new shooter from the team behind *Black*

By Rachel Penny



TARGET The enemy's medical center lies amid the broken-down concrete buildings and looks like a giant PS2.

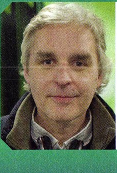
GUNFIRE *Bodycount* is about gathering an arsenal of big guns, then blasting the hell out of *everything.* Sounds lovely.

Destruction isn't just a cutscene or a set piece, but a key factor in shaping our progress.

Numerous shooters claim to offer a new twist on their well-worn genre, but *Bodycount* is the first we've seen to cite a lunatic popstar among its inspirations. "One of the maddest influences for us is definitely Lady Gaga," says creative director Stuart Black, who tells us that watching Gaga perform live made him want to shake up games in the same way that Gaga is turning the pop world upside down: "I looked at the software titles I have on my shelves from the last few years, and felt like they were really *beardy.*" So Black set about building a team to make something new and exciting, "A shooter for the 21st century." One with *really* big guns.

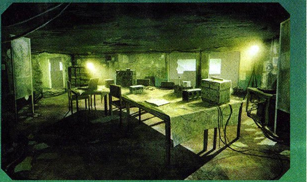
Mercifully, he stopped short of filling the new game with soldiers in glittery jumpsuits doing the talky bits from "Bad Romance." Instead, *Bodycount*—the first game from Codemasters' new Guildford studio, home to some of the Criterion team that created PS2 FPS *Black*—is a pacy, punchy shooter that leaves behind the usual grim-faced hero in dusty Generistan. "It's all about that visceral feedback to the player, so when they pull the trigger they really feel they've had an effect on the world," explains Black. As John Doe (yes, really), we'll be swept into a world of shootouts and drama by an agency known as the Network, which is using us to take down the Target, a shadowy organization that gets its kicks fiddling with the fate of the human race—so they drop us off in conflict hotspots and leave us to take out the enemy. To keep us on track and

Dev talk



"[The *CoD* team] is making games for the fanboys, for the people that are already converted. We want a shooter for everyone. We want them to get something unique and compelling out of it as well, but we want to go wider than that."
– Stuart Black, creative director

GEAR Everything from helicopters to military drones will be at our disposal—but the enemy's got them too.



update our missions, we'll have three ladies barking away down our earpiece. A bit like *The View*, but for killers rather than housewives.

Snarly angels

Often the ladies' instructions contradict each other, so we'll need to decide who to follow, and who to upset. Our choices won't lead to major game-changing consequences, but they'll affect how certain situations unfold. And with Black citing *Lost*

In the mix

The influences that make *Bodycount* brilliant

Black

Many of the *Bodycount* team worked on Criterion's *Black*, the 2006 gun-porn PS2 FPS. It focused on damage, perfectly rendered weapons, and lots of bullets. *Bodycount* will build on the mechanics and ideas developed in the team's earlier classic.

Lady Gaga

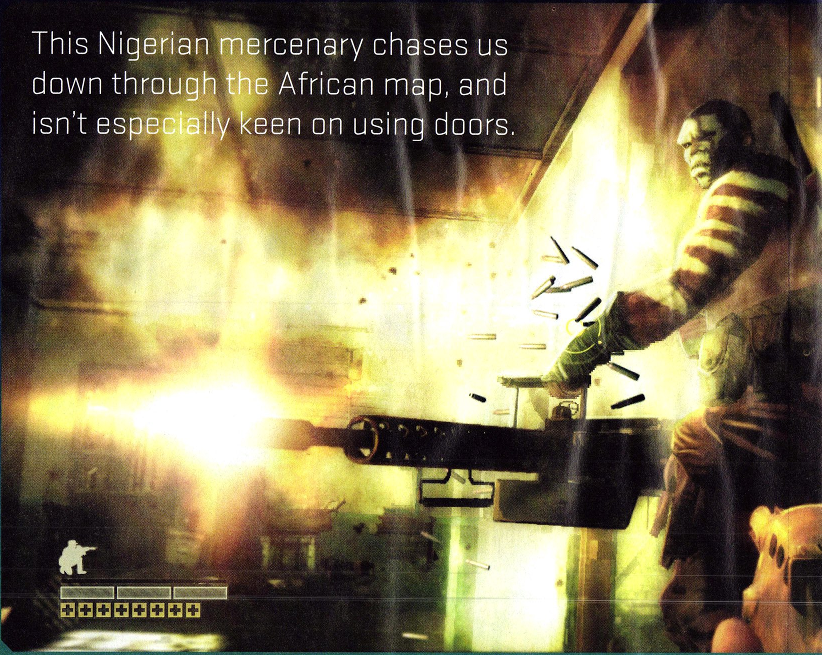
When Stuart Black saw Lady Gaga perform live, he was smitten, and her shocking performance inspired him to take a fresh look at the way he develops shooters. He wants *Bodycount* to feel as refreshing and innovative as pop's craziest princess.

J.J. Abrams

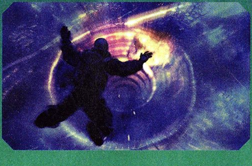
Writer and producer Abrams has worked on *Lost, Alias, Fringe,* and most recently *Star Trek.* With *Bodycount* adopting his brain-bending narrative style, expect to see twisty plots and excellent character development. And hopefully no time-traveling islands.

Apple

Bodycount's nefarious bad guys, known only as the Target, have been messing about with mankind for centuries, but their elegant interiors and sleek weapons technology are fully up to date. Think deadly stealth as designed by Apple.



This Nigerian mercenary chases us down through the African map, and isn't especially keen on using doors.



creator J.J. Abrams as another major reference point, we expect the story to offer a few breakneck twists too.

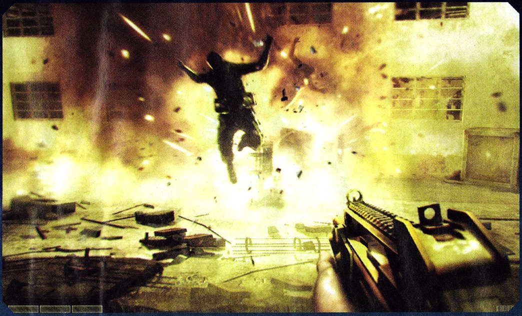
Our hands-on time with *Bodycount* is so early in development, the game is practically fetal (Codemasters won't even hint at the release date at this point), but it's already apparent that *Bodycount* is shaping up to be big fun. Set in Nigeria, it's been designed to revolutionize the physics of PS3 shooters in the same way *Black* aimed to do for PS2. We weave around smashed up vehicles, trying to avoid the bullets of shouting African soldiers, and make the mistake of hiding behind some destructible crates that may as well be a wall of cotton candy. Black offers survival tips: "Hunker down. Zoom in. And wait. Once you start firing, you get pretty inaccurate, pretty quickly." He's right. Enemies go down satisfyingly fast, but we're having to exercise both patience and precision. "You tend to start stabbing that fire button, and you get more and more inaccurate. Take a moment to settle behind cover, let the target reticule screw back in, then pump bullets into the guy."

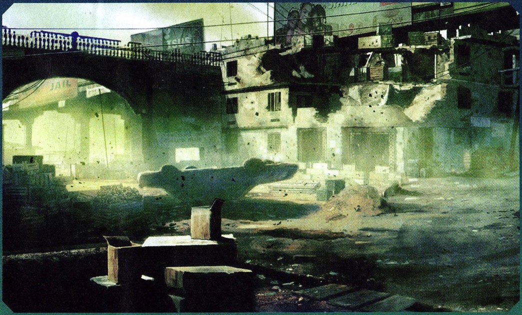
Dev talk

"In games you can be too clever for your own good. When you're building them you can look at it as a scientific problem or just as a set of magic tricks. And the best magic tricks are the simple ones—as long as you hide how it's done."

– Jon Creighton, lead programmer

All right, so destructible crates are hardly groundbreaking. But wait until you get a look at *Bodycount's* environmental damage. It's amazing. Walls blast away in layers to reveal plumbing; petrol pumps disintegrate before blowing up; and we spent a good 10 minutes stripping the wood paneling off a building for the sheer hell of it. "Everyone does that," says senior producer Andrew Wilson. In the finished version there'll also be intel to collect from fallen enemies, different classes to assist you (like medics and tech specialists), and gadgets (including





helicopters, Predator missiles, and drones) to help both sides in smashing up everything in sight.

The sunny African town that provides the stage for this destruction looks fantastic too, utilizing bright colors instead of the usual gray-and-brown shooter palette. "I want to get away from the look that's become the default for first-person shooters," art director Matt Cant tells us. It's his job to make sure that everything looks good, even when it's being blown back to atoms. The environment is going to change around you all the time, and the holes you can blast through walls aren't just cosmetic, they'll also give the enemy a new line of sight, and dictate whether we should be using short- or long-range weapons.

In the middle of the town, the black, monolithic tower of the Target medical center looms like a dark giant (and, bizarrely, resembles a super-sized Slimline PS2). These buildings are impenetrable with normal weaponry. But get inside and it's a completely different story: expensive-looking minimalist design, and lots of oh-so-breakable glass. Cant explains the Target aesthetic like this: "What would stealth technology look like if it was designed by Apple?" So, heinous plans for world domination, but enviable taste in hardware.

We've only seen a glimpse of *Bodycount,* but there's clearly huge promise here. Some of the credit goes to Codemasters' Ego engine, which Black describes as a bank the team was able to draw on to get things up and running fast—it was also used on *Operation Flashpoint,* although this is a markedly different game. The team is taking physics and particle systems from Codemasters' racing studio, then building on them with the all-important shredding technology that made stripping that house of its wooden veneer so much fun. It's not as hardcore as *Call of Duty* or *Killzone 2*—but then, as Black explains, it's not trying to be. "We're not trying to beat *CoD*. We're going off on our own path. We have our own values, and our own things that we think are going to be fun for a player. We're not worried about what other people are doing."

Under construction

When Stuart Black talks about shooters, we tend to listen. He was senior designer on notable PS2 shooter *Black,* so he knows his guns. A number of the *Bodycount* team also worked on that game, but Black is keen to point out that this is an entirely new project: "There are going to be similarities in terms of mechanics, but it's a completely different type of game." One thing is constant—it's all about the guns.

Black stresses that this is a work in progress—and insists that's a good thing: "Anybody who tells you at the start of their project that they know what their game will be at the end is talking bullsh–t. If you know what it is, that means someone else has probably already done it." We're pretty sure no one has done a Gaga-inspired shooter yet, so can we expect to see the pop priestess herself in the final game? Black perks up: "I'd love her to do a cameo!" Guns, girls, and Gaga. If that's not a shooter with potential, we don't know what is. ■

SHOWER
DANCE
OOLALA

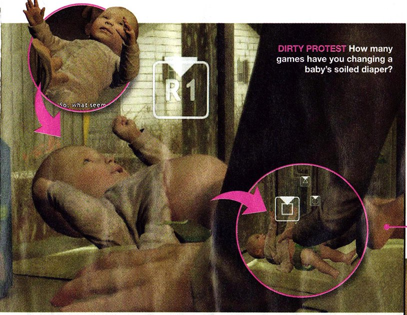
Warning:
HEAVY RAIN
Spoilers ahead

10 reasons why we love Heavy Rain

by Andy Kelly

1 IT'S SEXY

If you're a heterosexual male, you'll like insomniac journalist Madison Paige. And the game knows it, stripping her down to nothing but a pair of panties at every opportunity. But unlike most games, whose idea of "sexy" is a blonde girl with an inflated chest straddling a motorcycle and firing an Uzi, *Heavy Rain* will genuinely make you a bit hot along the inseam. This is thanks to its dizzyingly detailed character models, and the fact that Madison looks like a real woman, and not some developer's adolescent fantasy. Don't worry though, ladies: Ethan bares his buttocks too.

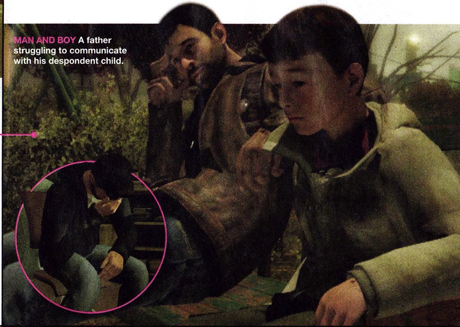


DIRTY PROTEST How many games have you changing a baby's soiled diaper?

2

IT'S MENTAL

The first chapter of *Heavy Rain* sees you showering, brushing your teeth, and helping your wife with the shopping. Later you cook an omelette for a bereaved mother, then crawl through a dark tunnel filled with broken glass at the behest of a serial killer. It's this marriage of the mundane and the fanciful that makes *Heavy Rain* so unique, as well as the fact that you're forced to interact with everything—from breaking the eggs to squeezing your toothpaste. You can even burn the omelette.

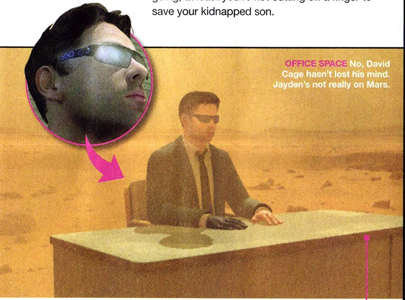


MAN AND BOY A father struggling to communicate with his despondent child.

3

IT'S REALLY DEPRESSING

A game about a child killer was never going to be all sunshine and trumpets, but *Heavy Rain* is especially bleak. Ethan spends most of the game weeping over his dead child and his splintered relationship, and the funereal atmosphere of the rain-soaked city only compounds the misery. But the endless grief is actually quite cathartic: no matter how bad your day is going, at least you're not cutting off a finger to save your kidnapped son.



OFFICE SPACE No, David Cage hasn't lost his mind. Jayden's not really on Mars.

4

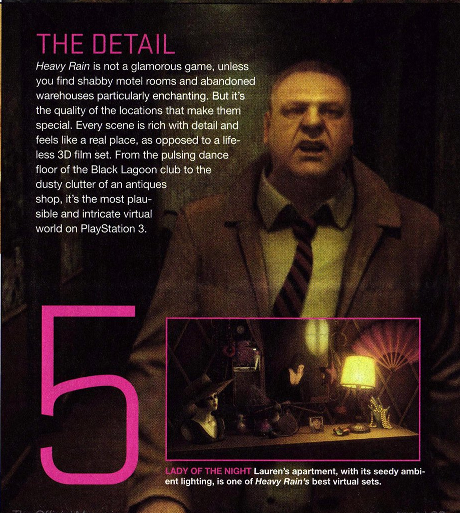
IT'S SLIGHTLY FUTURISTIC

Heavy Rain is set in the future (well, 2011), which explains the slightly advanced technology. FBI profiler Norman Jayden's ARI visor lets him scan crime scenes and examine evidence in a virtual 3D workspace. He can even change his surroundings while he works, choosing from a number of exotic virtual locations including the bottom of the ocean. Another example of future tech is the memory cards Ethan receives from the Origami Killer, which have a 32-terabyte capacity.

5

THE DETAIL

Heavy Rain is not a glamorous game, unless you find shabby motel rooms and abandoned warehouses particularly enchanting. But it's the quality of the locations that make them special. Every scene is rich with detail and feels like a real place, as opposed to a lifeless 3D film set. From the pulsing dance floor of the Black Lagoon club to the dusty clutter of an antiques shop, it's the most plausible and intricate virtual world on PlayStation 3.



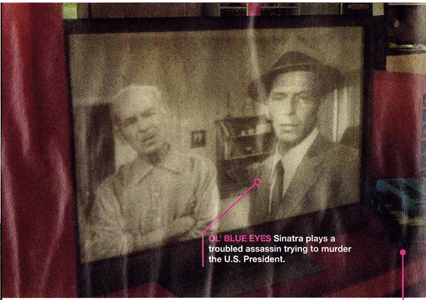
LADY OF THE NIGHT Lauren's apartment, with its seedy ambient lighting, is one of ***Heavy Rain's*** best virtual sets.

6

IT STARS REAL ACTORS

The characters in *Heavy Rain* are all based on the actors who play them, including British model Jacqui Ainsley (below) who stars as Madison. Every scene was physically acted out by the cast in a motion capture studio, footage you can unlock by finishing the game. There are also audition tapes where the cast awkwardly hams it up in front of director David Cage.

MOTION SENSING Oh, Jacqui. What we wouldn't give to be one of those reflective balls.



OL' BLUE EYES Sinatra plays a troubled assassin trying to murder the U.S. President.

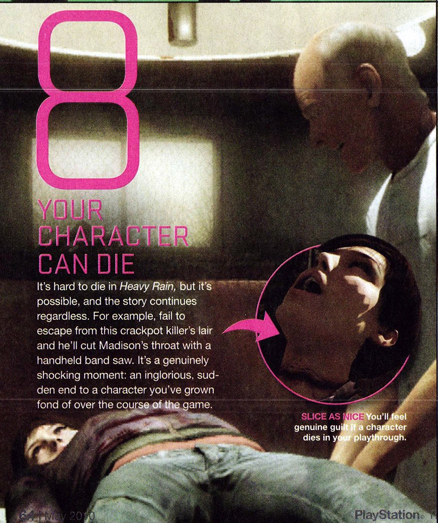
7

YOU CAN WATCH A MOVIE

In the first chapter, interact with the TV in Ethan's lounge while you wait for your wife to come home. You'll be able to watch a few scenes from *Suddenly,* a classic film from 1954 starring Frank Sinatra. There's no thematic similarity between the game and the movie, but *Suddenly* is considered one of the best examples of the film noir genre—one of *Heavy Rain's* most significant influences.

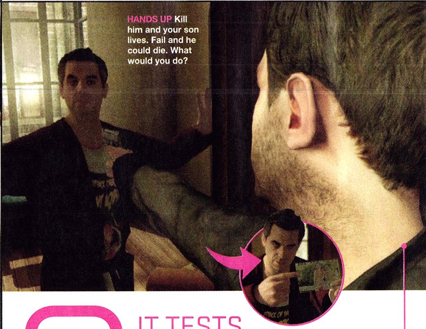
8

YOUR CHARACTER CAN DIE



It's hard to die in *Heavy Rain,* but it's possible, and the story continues regardless. For example, fail to escape from this crackpot killer's lair and he'll cut Madison's throat with a handheld band saw. It's a genuinely shocking moment: an inglorious, sudden end to a character you've grown fond of over the course of the game.

SLICE AS NICE You'll feel genuine guilt if a character dies in your playthrough.

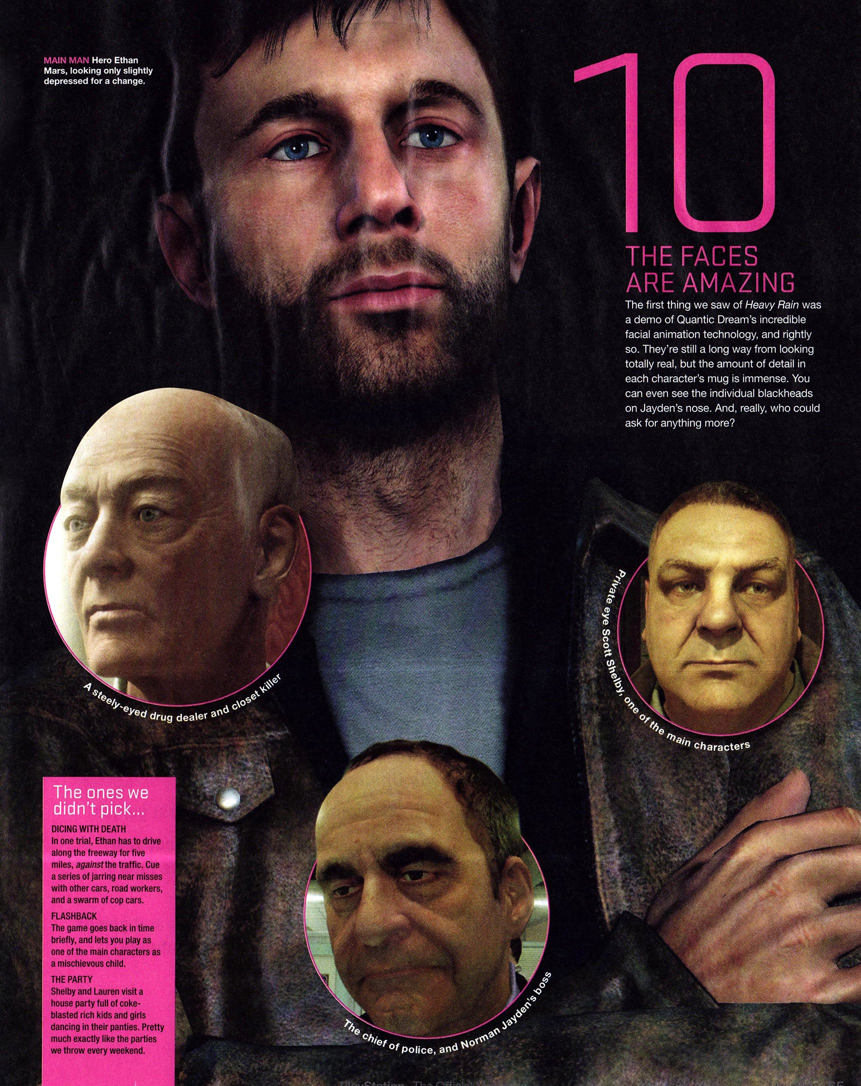


HANDS UP Kill him and your son lives. Fail and he could die. What would you do?

9

IT TESTS YOUR MORALS

One of the Origami Killer's most harrowing trials is when Ethan is forced to kill a man he knows nothing about in cold blood. When you confront the guy, a drug dealer, he immediately pulls out a shotgun and fights back. But resist the urge to shoot him long enough and he'll start waving a picture of his kids in your face. Can you bring yourself to pull the trigger? It's the game's most challenging moral quandary.



MAIN MAN Hero Ethan Mars, looking only slightly depressed for a change.

A steely-eyed drug dealer and closet killer

Private eye Scott Shelby, one of the main characters

The chief of police, and Norman Jayden's boss

10

THE FACES ARE AMAZING

The first thing we saw of *Heavy Rain* was a demo of Quantic Dream's incredible facial animation technology, and rightly so. They're still a long way from looking totally real, but the amount of detail in each character's mug is immense. You can even see the individual blackheads on Jayden's nose. And, really, who could ask for anything more?

The ones we didn't pick…

DICING WITH DEATH
In one trial, Ethan has to drive along the freeway for five miles, *against* the traffic. Cue a series of jarring near misses with other cars, road workers, and a swarm of cop cars.

FLASHBACK
The game goes back in time briefly, and lets you play as one of the main characters as a mischievous child.

THE PARTY
Shelby and Lauren visit a house party full of coke-blasted rich kids and girls dancing in their panties. Pretty much exactly like the parties we throw every weekend.

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JUST CAUSE 2

Just add explosions

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: Square Enix DEVELOPER: Avalanche Studios

For a small Southeast Asian island nation, Panau sure is...*big.* We realized this after completing a series of missions that took us from tropical beaches to arid deserts to a remote military installation on a snow-covered mountain. Using commandeered sea, land, and airborne vehicles, we ascended to Panau's heights—but after decimating the facility and scourging the government forces, it hit us: We're stranded in the middle of nowhere with no ride back. ➔

STAR SYSTEM

HOW IT WORKS

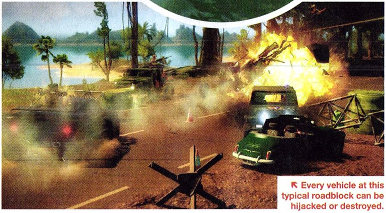
5 STARS: Legendary
A game so amazing, the entire PTOM staff recommends it. A must buy!

4 STARS: Great
A finely crafted, thoroughly enjoyable experience. Worth your time and money.

3 STARS: Enjoyable
If the topic/license/style is your thing, there's enough to keep you entertained.

2 STARS: Scarred
A smattering of entertainment hidden amongst an abundance of flaws.

1 STAR: A Flop
We played it so you don't have to. Now you owe us cookies.



↖ Every vehicle at this typical roadblock can be hijacked or destroyed.

➔ We could have summoned our black-market contact for extraction and delivery back to any number of previously accessed locations—but that would've been too easy. Plus, we'd just unlocked a few new missions, and a quick peek at our map indicated they were *juuust* over a nearby mountain peak…

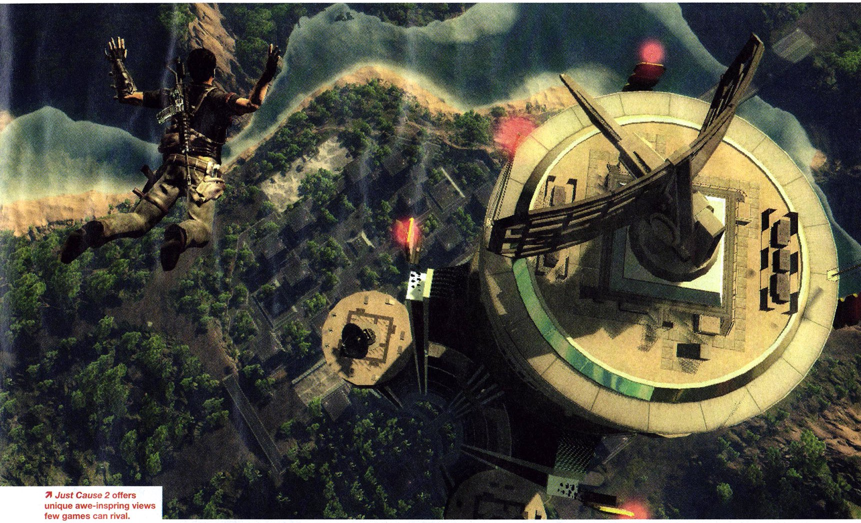
So off we went, hoofing it up to the summit. Ten minutes later we arrived, and after a brief (but breathtaking) pause to enjoy the panoramic view, we catapulted into the air and deployed our ram-air–style parachute for the 15-minute glide back to civilization and our next explosive fray.

Sun, surf, and sandbox

While 25-minutes of slowdown time might not seem too excessive, it's jarringly sedate for a game that promises an expansive sandbox filled with over-the-top action sequences.

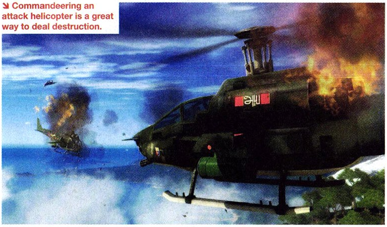
Not that the serene birds-eye view was unwelcome. In fact, it offered a respite from *Just Cause 2's* frequent firefights, allowing us to contemplate what brought us to Panau, what we had uncovered plot-wise—and what we had thus far discovered regarding effective gameplay.

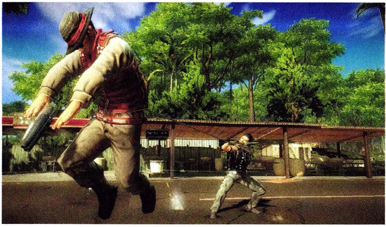
"Agency" operative Rico Rodriguez was dispatched to the island nation to overthrow its newly (self-) anointed dictator, Baby Panay. Key to the success of Rico's mission is locating and discovering the fate of his mentor and friend, Tom Sheldon, who's believed to have gone off the reservation and begun operating for his own profit. Along the way, Rico assumes the role of Scorpio, a lethal gun-for-hire, to infiltrate the island's three power-hungry factions (the religiously extreme Ular Boys, the communist Reapers, and the organized criminal Roaches). Completing faction missions expands their spheres of influence and results in the destabilization



↗ *Just Cause 2* offers unique awe-inspring views few games can rival.

↘ Commandeering an attack helicopter is a great way to deal destruction.





> Like any B-movie, stellar storytelling is secondary to big explosions and even bigger action sequences.

of Baby Panay's corrupt regime, as Rico races to discover why this banana republic has suddenly inspired such intense interest from rival superpowers' intelligence agencies.

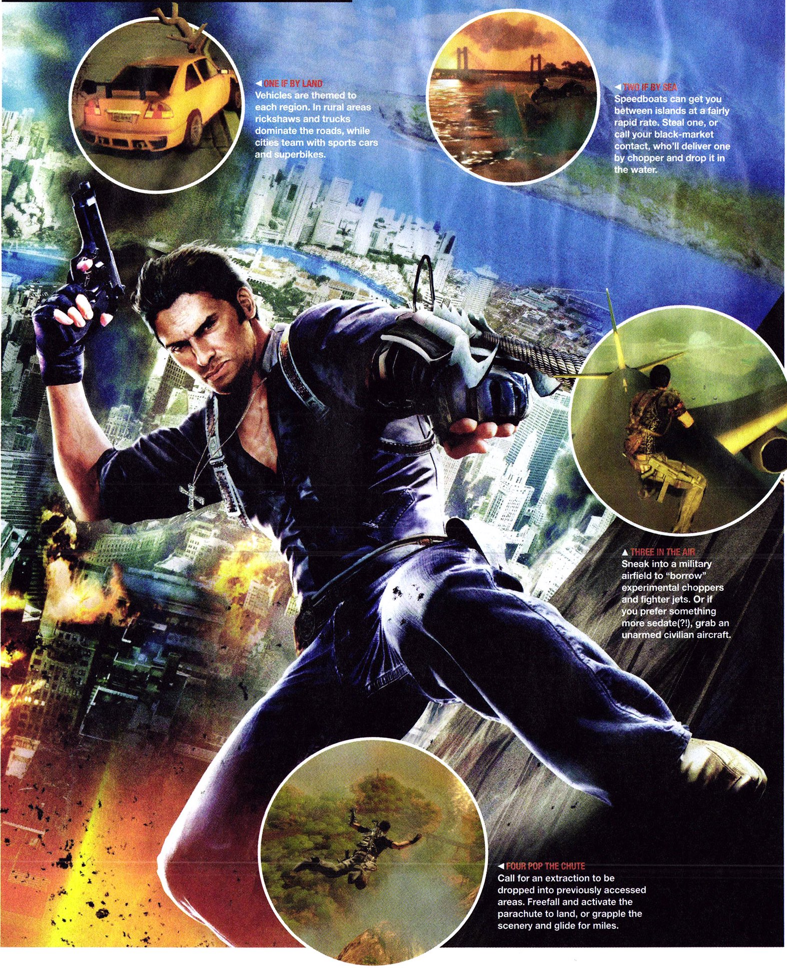
While the storyline is adequately engrossing, *Just Cause 2* is no *Uncharted 2* when it comes to intrigue and character development—regardless of any superficial physical resemblance between Rico and Nathan Drake. If *Uncharted* is a triple-A adventure film, consider *Just Cause* a B-movie action flick. But like any B-movie, stellar storytelling is secondary to big explosions and even bigger action sequences. If you enter the *Just Cause 2* sandbox with a bucket of popcorn and the appropriate style-over-substance mindset, it *will* provide an entertaining ride.

Death and destruction

The gameplay is all about hurtling big buckets of sand around the biggest sandbox environment to hit the PS3. And as befitting a sandbox game, the actual fun lay in how creatively we utilized the toys found in the box (the weapons, vehicles, buildings, etc.) to manufacture our own particular brand of mayhem and adventure. Gunplay, whether with personal firearms or armed vehicles, lies at the core of the experience, but two distinctive pieces of equipment—the grappling hook and parachute—expand the potential method and manner of kills exponentially.

Standard third-person shooters might offer the option to kill an enemy soldier by firing a machine gun, tossing a grenade, or punching a goon in the neck. *Just Cause 2* offers those options as well, but we preferred to grapple the enemy, then fire bullets into him as we pulled him toward us; or attach the grapple's other end to a second soldier to bungee the two into each other; or leash the fiend to a passing car to be dragged to his doom, and so on. Or, if pizzazz is paramount, how about deploying the parachute to go airborne to grapple

Island Tourism FOUR WAYS TO TRAVERSE PANAU IN STYLE

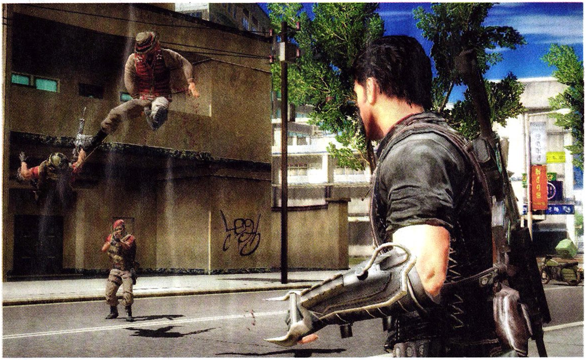


◄ **ONE IF BY LAND**
Vehicles are themed to each region. In rural areas rickshaws and trucks dominate the roads, while cities team with sports cars and superbikes.

◄ **TWO IF BY SEA**
Speedboats can get you between islands at a fairly rapid rate. Steal one, or call your black-market contact, who'll deliver one by chopper and drop it in the water.

▲ **THREE IN THE AIR**
Sneak into a military airfield to "borrow" experimental choppers and fighter jets. Or if you prefer something more sedate(?!), grab an unarmed civilian aircraft.

◄ **FOUR POP THE CHUTE**
Call for an extraction to be dropped into previously accessed areas. Freefall and activate the parachute to land, or grapple the scenery and glide for miles.



> “Discovering what’s destructible in the environment and finding ways to explode them is even more addictive than brainstorming kill techniques.”

an attack helicopter, kill the crew and toss out the pilot, then pepper the original enemy target with mini-gun and rocket fire?

As horrific as that might sound, the violence level is only slightly edgier than your average *A-Team* TV episode (where bullets never actually seemed to kill anyone). *Just Cause 2’s* enemies sprout red splotches when shot, but no pools of blood or dismembered body parts are in evidence. In fact, soldiers’ bodies miraculously disappear into the ether about a minute after post-mortem.

It might be more accurate to characterize the game as gratuitously *destructive* than violent. Discovering what’s destructible in the environments and finding ways to explode them is even more addictive than brainstorming kill techniques—the visual payoff is bigger, after all. Air attacks are the quickest way to decimate an enemy facility, while a tank assault deals destruction at a more leisurely pace, but a Gatling gun is a surprisingly satisfying option when redecorating a military base.

Island fever

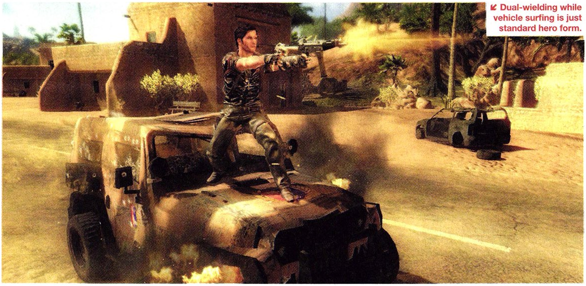
But as much fun as it is to create chaos (which the game rewards with cash, unlockables, and story advancement), it’s *Just Cause 2’s* death-and-destruction tunnel vision that ultimately prevents it from elevating beyond the world’s most explodey play set. The plethora of vehicles (over 100) and locations (over 300), along with the numerous side-missions, served as constant distractions that ultimately disrupted the sense of flow and detached us from the game’s central storyline. When we started to care more about finding all of the game’s 2700 resource items than the central characters’ fates, we knew the sandbox had won.

And even in the sandbox, there were some problems: the enemy AI is uninspired at best, offering little beyond the occasional evasive maneuver. The game balances out the problem with sheer numbers, or with the vexing tactic of assaulting us from the rear when we were focused on enemies in front of us.

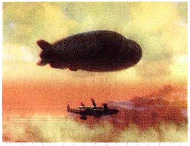
The other complaint may seem silly considering our acceptance of the game’s disappearing dead bodies, but the doors… Practically every building on Panau has at least one, but only a few of them can actually be opened and they’re absolutely indestructible, no matter what weapon we wielded. If there’s a nuclear bomb to be had on Panau, we’re certain it wouldn’t be enough to knock down one of its uber-doors.

But perhaps what’s truly gratuitous in *Just Cause 2* is all the wandering—wandering the island, wandering away from primary objectives, and our wandering attention span for the story. And yet what’s surprising was our willingness to continue wandering through the sands of this humungous box. There’s just so much to do here and, when our creativity’s at the top of its game, it’s just so much fun to destroy. Panau may have its problems, but we’ll be calling in an extraction and heading there again soon. | Roger Burchill

Rating ★★★★☆



↙ Dual-wielding while vehicle surfing is just standard hero form.



↑ Fav Island Sights

BOOGIE WONDERSHIP In between missions a strange dual-blimped airborne craft constantly piqued our interest. One ’jacked jet later, we grappled onboard to discover the “Mile High Club,” Panau’s most exclusive nightspot.

SPACE RACE Infiltrating a space center to destroy three satellite launch vehicles before they blasted off was thrilling, but stealing a Harrier Jump Jet to shoot down the fourth before it reached orbit was out of this world.

YOU’RE SHIPPIN’ ME Racing up a desert mountain range on dirt bikes, we encountered a shipwreck. But this isn’t someone’s speedboat; it’s a full-blown 10,000-ton transport ship miles from the ocean. How did *that* get here?

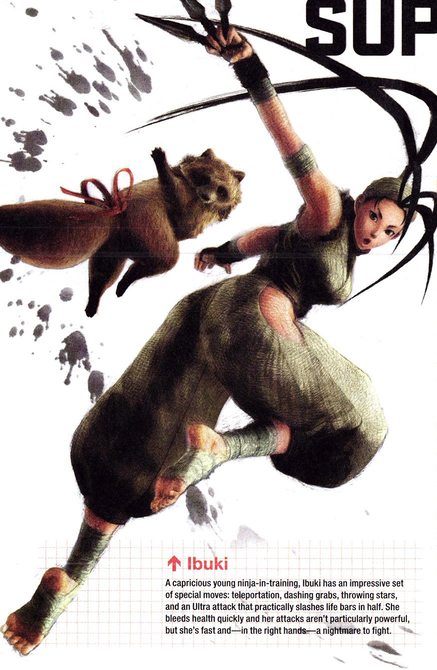
SUITE BATTLES Boss battles are to be expected, but three bosses atop one high-rise hotel? And contending with the orbital satellite beam weapon before a boss has an armored personal carrier airdropped in? Not kidding.

PLAYER 1
K.O.
16
PLAYER 2
Makoto
FeiLong
COMBO
ULTRA
EX
EX

SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV

Round two knockout

PS3 PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Capcom DEVELOPER: Capcom



↑ Ibuki

A capricious young ninja-in-training, Ibuki has an impressive set of special moves: teleportation, dashing grabs, throwing stars, and an Ultra attack that practically slashes life bars in half. She bleeds health quickly and her attacks aren't particularly powerful, but she's fast and—in the right hands—a nightmare to fight.

Don't yet own a copy of *Street Fighter IV?* Then you don't even need to *think* about this. *Super Street Fighter IV* is a fully loaded and more polished version of last year's *Street Fighter IV,* so at just $40 it's an absolute steal—especially since *SSIV* is such a phenomenally fun and deceptively deep game, one that anyone with even a passing interest in fighting games needs to experience.

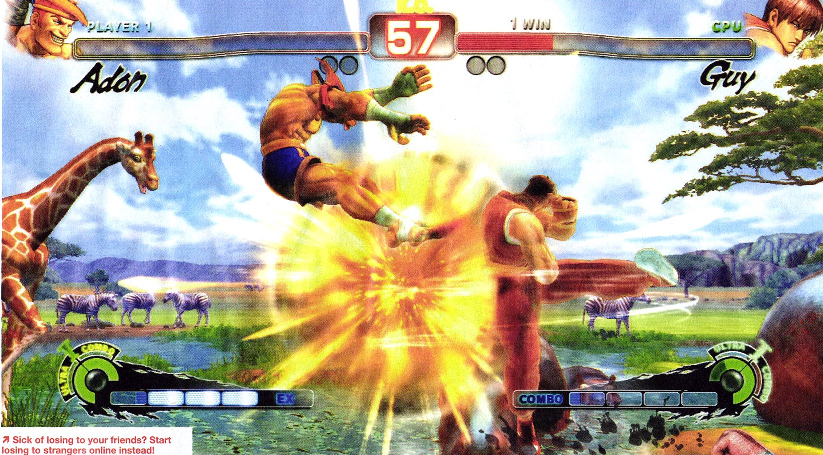
If, on the other hand, you did purchase *SFIV,* you have a bit more to think about. Yes, the gameplay remains exceptional, expertly blending the time-tested move sets of the franchise's iconic fighters with a smattering of dynamic new ideas—from the gorgeous 3D graphics (despite the traditional 2D fighting plane) to the spectacular Ultra combos that can turn a match around. And yes, the game as a whole still strikes an impressive balance between depth and accessibility, offering a satisfying experience for beginners and experts alike.

But given that the basic fighting mechanics (though admittedly brilliant) are largely the same between the two games, what makes *Super Street Fighter IV* worthwhile for those who bought the first game? Well, aside from a few nearly imperceptible adjustments to the balance of the roster, the answer is, of course, new content. Most importantly, new characters.

Nice to beat you

Characters are the lifeblood of any fighting game, so injecting 10 new fighters into the mix has a tremendous impact on the game. The single-player Arcade Mode is suddenly new and exciting again. Playing online becomes exponentially more unpredictable and challenging. And simply exploring the ins and outs of the new fighters is fun and rewarding itself.

The game's training mode is still as frustrating as it is helpful; the precision timing required to execute sophisticated combos is downright infuriating without any kind of practical assistance. That said, the



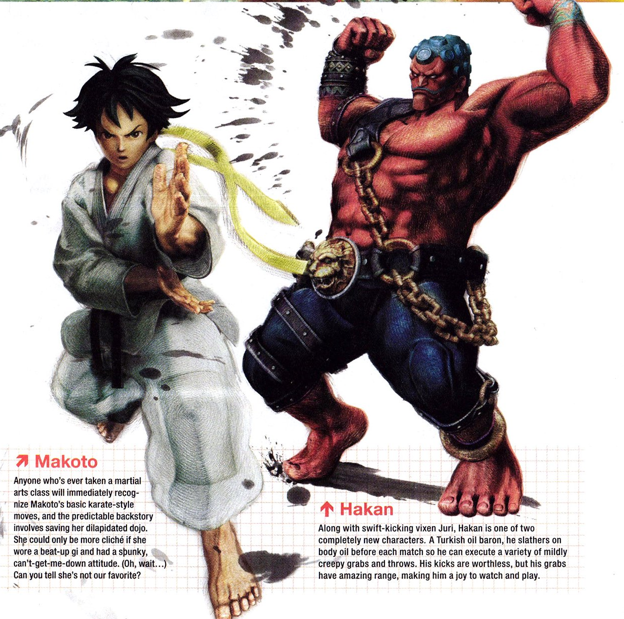
↗ Sick of losing to your friends? Start losing to strangers online instead!

10 newbies are so diverse and fully realized that we spent a few enjoyable hours with each just beating up a dummy for laughs. The more we played, the more we realized just how little we really comprehend *Street Fighter's* dizzyingly rich mechanics. On the whole, none of the new brawlers managed to immediately displace our favorites, but each one has something unique to offer. Except Makoto. She's basically useless.

The existing roster has also been freshened up thanks to the new secondary Ultra option, allowing us to choose our preferred attack before each bout. Though the impact of this addition isn't dramatic, it's certainly welcome. We've always had a bit of trouble executing Ultras that require two full rotations of the analog stick, so now we can just select the second option and avoid the problem altogether.

Match ups and downs

Multiplayer also has a few additions. In Endless Battles, opponents create pools of fighters who face off one-on-one; the winner always stays on to fight again. Team Battle also allows us to create a party, only this time the group splits into two teams, each with a set order; the teams compete in a series of one-on-one matches (with health bars resetting to full between each match) until one team runs out of combatants.

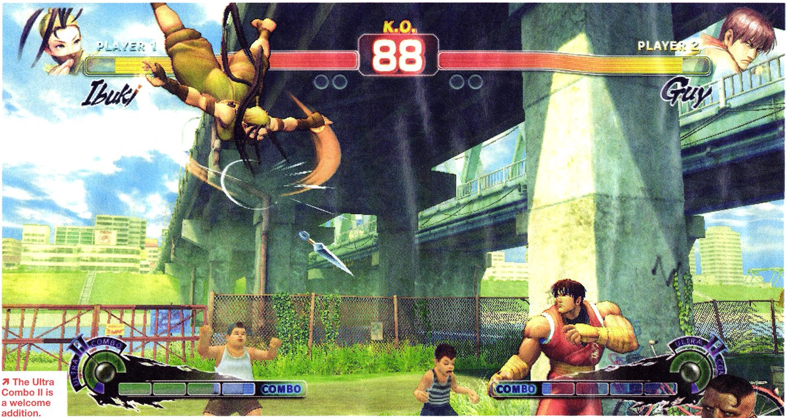


↗ Makoto

Anyone who's ever taken a martial arts class will immediately recognize Makoto's basic karate-style moves, and the predictable backstory involves saving her dilapidated dojo. She could only be more cliché if she wore a beat-up gi and had a spunky, can't-get-me-down attitude. (Oh, wait…) Can you tell she's not our favorite?

↑ Hakan

Along with swift-kicking vixen Juri, Hakan is one of two completely new characters. A Turkish oil baron, he slathers on body oil before each match so he can execute a variety of mildly creepy grabs and throws. His kicks are worthless, but his grabs have amazing range, making him a joy to watch and play.



↗ The Ultra Combo II is a welcome addition.

And the surprisingly robust Replay Channel lets us save and share our replays as well as view random replays of favorite characters.

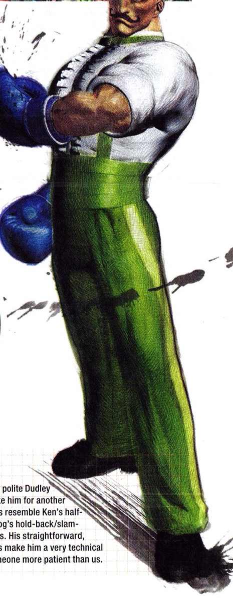
We don't find any of these new options to be particularly exhilarating, but they're welcome nonetheless. Actually, we're more concerned about the absence of a Player Match (read: unranked) option. Though we were able to set up an unranked Endless Battle match for just two people, it's strange to see a frequently used option inexplicably disappear. Even more distressing: the single-player Time Trial and Survivor modes have also vanished, along with the Theater option that let us rewatch those awful, awful cutscenes (which, by the way, have been updated…but are still awful).

At least we can take solace in the five new combat arenas, two classic bonus stages (car destruction and barrel breaking), and significantly better load times. Oh, and unlocking individual characters no longer requires completing single-player over and over. Everyone is available right from the start.

For those who missed out on *Street Fighter IV* the first time around, we can't endorse this title strongly enough. For the rest of us, *Super Street Fighter IV* won't offer quite the same value, but the new combatants certainly make a compelling case for our hard-earned cash. | Scott Butterworth

Rating ★★★★½

↖ T. Hawk takes "talk to the hand" just a little too far.



↗ Dudley

Though the impeccably polite Dudley is a boxer, don't mistake him for another Balrog. Dudley's moves resemble Ken's half-circles more than Balrog's hold-back/slam-forward special attacks. His straightforward, realistic punch combos make him a very technical fighter, perfect for someone more patient than us.

What's on your radar for 2010?

GAMEPLAN Insights

NICK WILLIAMS | OTX DIRECTOR, GAMING INSIGHTS

OTX's GamePlan weekly tracking study surveys 1,000 U.S. gamers and game buyers including hardcore gamers, casual gamers and everyone in between. The study tracks up to 600 game SKUs at any given time, including all major console, handheld, PC, and iPhone titles.

The long awaited Gran Turismo 5 ranks atop the list of most anticipated PlayStation 3 titles. With an expected Q4 2010 release date, GT5 has the potential to be a significant holiday hardware driver. The latest GamePlan Insights data shows that 33 percent of those who plan to purchase GT5 do not yet own a PS3.

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises of 2009 was the runaway success of Batman: Arkham Asylum. The future looks bright for the newly invented Batman series, as Warner Bros recently announced it purchased a majority interest in UK-based developer Rocksteady Studios. The sequel ranks second on the upcoming list of PS3 titles, and we expect interest to continue to grow as more information becomes available.

Third-party sequels account for the remainder of the top 10, with highly anticipated new installments from renowned franchises such as Street Fighter, Prince of Persia, and Max Payne.

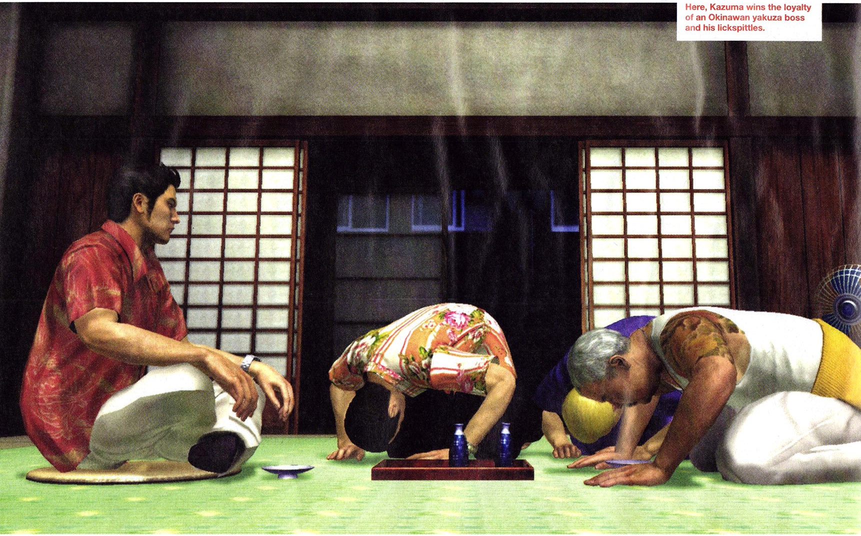
For more information, visit
www.GamePlanInsights.com

TOP 10 PS3 GAMES[1]

1. **Gran Turismo 5**
   Sony Computer Entertainment
2. **Batman: Arkham Asylum 2**
   WB Interactive
3. **Super Street Fighter IV**
   Capcom
4. **Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands**
   Ubisoft
5. **Max Payne 3**
   Rockstar Games
6. **Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 4**
   Ubisoft
7. **Fallout: New Vegas**
   Bethesda Softworks
8. **The Sims 3**
   Electronic Arts
9. **Dead Rising 2**
   Capcom
10. **True Crime**
    Activision

Data Date Range: January 31, 2010 to February 27, 2010 (sample size - 2,000)
All OTX metrics are indexed against titles releasing on/after April 1, 2010.
[1] Top titles based on purchase intent collected via OTX's weekly tracking study of 1,000 gamers in the US.

By OTX



Here, Kazuma wins the loyalty of an Okinawan yakuza boss and his lickspittles.

YAKUZA 3

Gangster wrap...

PS3 **PRICE:** $54.99 **ESRB:** Mature **PUBLISHER:** Sega **DEVELOPER:** Sega

Other games might promise such delectable offerings as sprinting transvestites, or adults casually ripping off their shirts to fight, or creepy businessmen groping young schoolgirls while a former gangster turned *hausfrau* captures the moment on his cell phone—but only *Yakuza 3* truly keeps it. In fact, the third-person adventure delivers on its promise of almost impenetrable Bizarro-world shenanigans so thoroughly and so spectacularly, it can claim to be the ultimate statement on the matter.

Welcome to Kazuma Kiryu's life. The former gangster and protagonist of *Yakuza* and its sequel is now a house mom, tending to waifs at the Sunshine Orphanarium. He's equal parts Mike and Carol, and having to deal with *Brady Bunch*-style issues such as asthma, schoolyard bullying, and a missing allowance may well be the nadir of videogames as a medium.

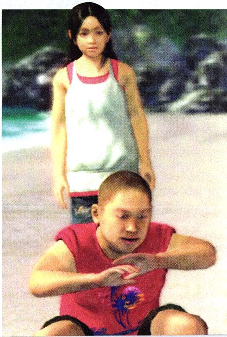
Sights and fights

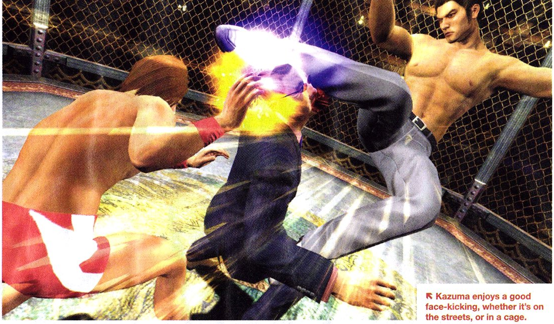
Things pick up, and soon Kiryu trots off to Tokyo and begins kicking faces. The plot is an impenetrable jumble of nonsense piled on top of absurdities involving warring gangs; an international arms smuggling ring; the Japanese Diet; the U.S. military; suspect land deals; the Central Intelligence Agency; and, maybe, that guy from Wham! who wasn't George Michael, but at least *Yakuza* has the good sense to bury most of its story in skippable cutscenes.

Tokyo and Okinawa serve as the game's true draw. The game presents two well-stocked cities to explore, and gives Kiryu free reign to wander them aimlessly at regular intervals. As eye candy, these environments shine; they're laden with neon and an endless parade of humanity. Exploration reveals a wealth of strange and wonderful discoveries: magazines in the convenience store, a van where strange men sell weapons, a seemingly endless series of lost locker keys just lying about. Bars feature scantily clad woman slowly spinning around gleaming metal poles. The arcades offer a surprisingly addictive "UFO Catcher" crane game. There's bowling and darts and gambling to be had. Women in burger joints will request dates, and be enchanted at the thought of warbling at the local karaoke establishment.

In its free-exploration bits, the game generously tips its hat to Yu Suzuki's sprawling Dreamcast title *Shenmue,* and in the unsupervised antics and glow of nostalgia, *Yakuza 3* hits its highest note. The game generously allows for huge chunks of aimless meandering, only gently nudging players back to the plot, and those disinclined toward the leash should revel at Kiryu's lack of tether.

As a fighting vehicle, *Yakuza 3* proves more problematic. The game allows for new brawling maneuvers, spectacular finishing moves (including an extended sequence straight out of Vince McMahon's WWE),





↖ Kazuma enjoys a good face-kicking, whether it's on the streets, or in a cage.

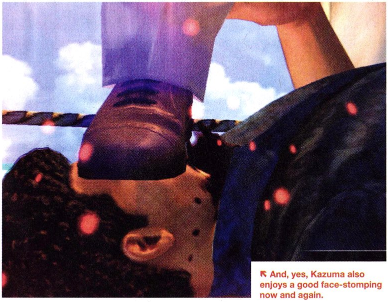
> “ The plot is an impenetrable jumble involving warring gangs; an arms smuggling ring; the Japanese Diet; the U.S. military; the CIA; and, maybe, that guy from Wham! ”

↗ During a quiet moment, Kazuma tells a waif that gruel won't cook itself.

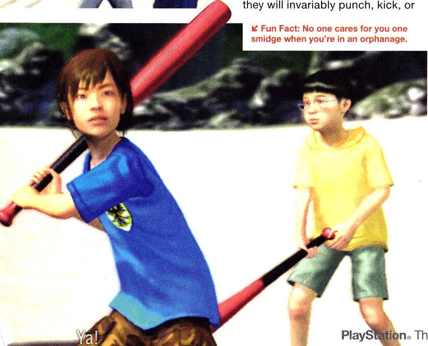
↗ “I am disrespectful to dirt!” – *Mr. Sparkle*

↘ Race for your life, Kazuma Kiryu

Yakuza 3 loves its chase scenes. Protagonist Kazuma Kiryu gets chased by the Tokyo cops. He sprints after orphans, regardless of their filthiness. For the most part, these scenes are overdone and problematic, but one stands out as praiseworthy. Pursued by a love-stricken transvestite, Kiryu must flee for his life, leap over trashcans, and avoid pedestrians in an attempt to avoid, well, the least amount of fun he may ever have with his pants off. If not comedy gold, it's at least comedy bronze.



↖ And, yes, Kazuma also enjoys a good face-stomping now and again.



↙ Fun Fact: No one cares for you one smidge when you're in an orphanage.

throws, counters, and weapons-based attacks, but still features problems highlighted in *Yakuza* and *Yakuza 2*. Combatants, be they player- or artificial intelligence-controlled, still possess little-to-no situational awareness, meaning they will invariably punch, kick, or grab beyond an enemy's body, and thus present their backs for summary and painful judgment. This happens frequently, and serves to pothole most, if not all, of *Yakuza's* important battles.

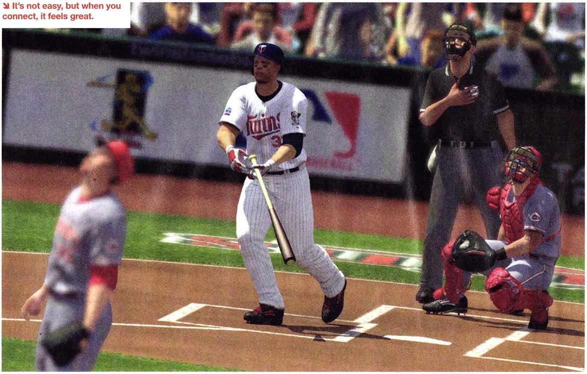
The game also punctuates its battles with quick-time events wherein Kiryu and his nemeses pull off spectacular moves and combinations. It's a cardinal sin to cruelly yank players from gameplay—especially in the midst of a heated brawl. It destroys momentum, and breaks down any sort of fantasy that these are real-world fights and not a videogame with very obvious videogame mechanics. In a game so reliant on fisticuffs and blood sprays, this is not at all a good thing.

Lost in translation

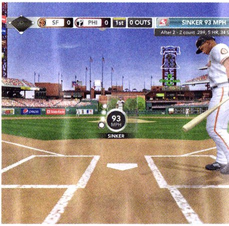
Yakuza also suffers from an almost debilitating yappiness. At times, players must repeatedly hammer on the DualShock controller's X button to advance through a huge wall of text presented in one- or two-line chunks. All the spoken dialogue is in Japanese, so the prospect of poring over someone's workman-like but none-too-brief translations holds only a limited appeal. Alternately, the game's prerendered cutscenes sprawl out in extended chunks, with every character seemingly eager to make a grand pronouncement. No stab at brevity is ever made here, and the game's beginning and, notably, its conclusion suffer for it.

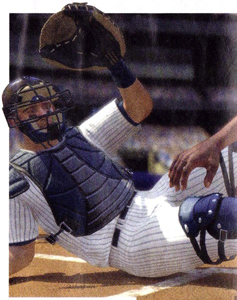
Eminently Japanese, *Yakuza 3* brings some humanity and goofiness aplenty to the table. Few games have the chutzpah to reward players for photographing a molestation, but *Yakuza* uses this as an engine to expand Kiryu's fighting prowess. And there are some genuinely charming bits to be had amid the face crunching and stabbing. At one point, Kiryu dons a goofy mask and takes up wrestling to entertain a sick waif. It's just the kind of guy he is, and it's impossible to dislike him for it. | Greg Orlando

Rating ★★★☆☆



↘ It's not easy, but when you connect, it feels great.





↗ Replays let you see exciting sequences up close.

MLB 2K10

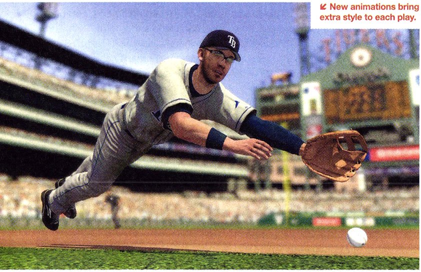
Pitching for big bucks

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: 2K Sports DEVELOPER: Visual Concepts

No doubt the *MLB 2K* series has had a tough time of it on PlayStation, challenging what's perennially a slick and complete opponent in SCEA's *The Show.* Efforts to enforce hitting and pitching styles that require a fine manipulation of the analog sticks might craft elements of realistic motion...but so does throwing your controller through the TV screen when your efforts to chuck a fastball down the middle are thwarted by overly fussy mechanics. It's a touchy balance improved for *2K10,* creating a batter/pitcher duel that can prove incredibly rewarding, but still takes significant practice time to master.

Stick with it

Bullet points for the game packaging don't mean squat if the core showdown of guy-on-the-mound against guy-in-the-box doesn't hold your attention. For *2K10* it's as compelling as the franchise has ever managed. Newcomers will find the pitching mechanic awkward, for sure. Hitting the catcher's mark with a pitch requires incredibly accurate movement of the Right-stick plus perfect timing. At least this year, missing a pitch delivery entirely doesn't automatically result in the batter—any batter—launching it into the ether. Similarly, the batting mechanic requires flowing the Right-stick through the strike zone with perfect timing and location. Personally, we found it harder to get the batting stroke down than we did the pitching. Alerts that we're swinging too late or too early help, but it still requires identifying the location of the pitch in an instant.



↙ New animations bring extra style to each play.

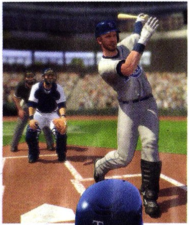
Flicking the Right-stick left or right throws out a defensive hack, which gives the potential for multiple foul balls and 10-plus pitch at-bats. Thing is, it results in more than we'd normally see in a game. But it's hard to see the effectiveness of this overall mechanic in a single game where we might be facing staff aces and playing with offensive powerhouse teams like the Yankees. The realism of stats and situations begins to reveal itself over the course of a full season, and that makes the commitment worthwhile.

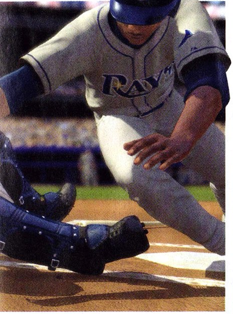
Show stoppers

So all well and good so far. Then, out on the field for our very first regular season game, the batter rakes a single into right field. Now, Nate Schierholtz for our Giants has a cannon arm, but throwing out the runner at first (and by a yard) is the kind of AI groan that undermines the overall experience. It's only happened once (so far), but an ignoble start.

Playing through a full 162-game season (no playoffs for the Gigantes this year, according to *2K10)* is a real endurance test. The new faster-paced My Player mode is a fun way to get to the bigs and enjoy a career. An option to only play the parts that involve our guy means we ripped through a AA season fairly quickly, and a friendly advancement curve means we made our big league debut in a couple of seasons. It has a few oddities, typical for a first-time-out feature, and lacks sufficient on-screen instructions to help us figure out fielding and particularly base-running maneuvers. But it definitely tugs at the ambition strings of wannabe big leaguers.

The signature highlights, updated animations, Top 3 plays showcase from a game, and the usual expected





pieces of the package round out the broadcast-style experience. It's still undermined by AI niggles, animation glitches, and the lack of a check-swing. Of course, taking time to learn its quirks and master its controls can pay off like no other baseball game, with $1 million on the line for the first person to pitch a perfect game. That's motivation. | Alex Clark

Rating ★★★★☆

➔ What would you do for $1 million?

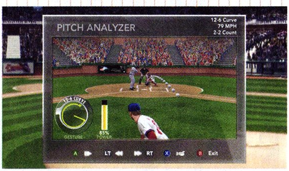
"See how tough it is, take a couple of days off, and I may have to quit my job."

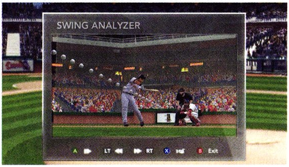
Jordan Bokter, an avid *MLB 2K* player, is telling us about his dedication to win the $1 million prize for pitching the perfect game. The Minnesotan became one of the best online players of *MLB 2K9*, and though he confesses to not having thrown a perfect game, he does claim multiple no-hitters.

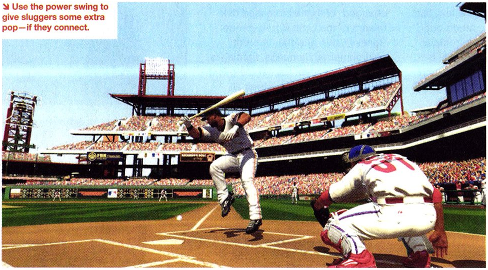
To win, he'll have to be flawless using *2K10's* "Perfect Game" mode, which allows no mound visits (used to calm an errant pitcher or give him a breather), and automatically selects a random starter from the pitching rotation.

Undeterred, Bokter has his video camera on order (each effort must be accompanied by a digital filming of the event) and is prepared to "do whatever it takes…that's a lot of cheese," he says, aping box-cover star Evan Longoria from the game's commercial.

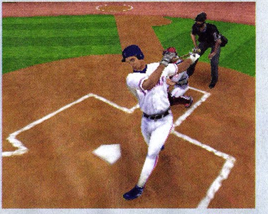
Deadline for perfection and to submit video proof is the end of May.







➘ Use the power swing to give sluggers some extra pop—if they connect.



↑ Get used to swinging and missing.

MLB 2K10

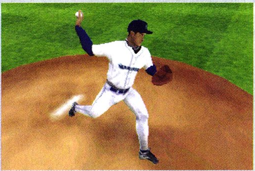
Small, but still a baller

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: 2K Sports DEVELOPER: 2K China

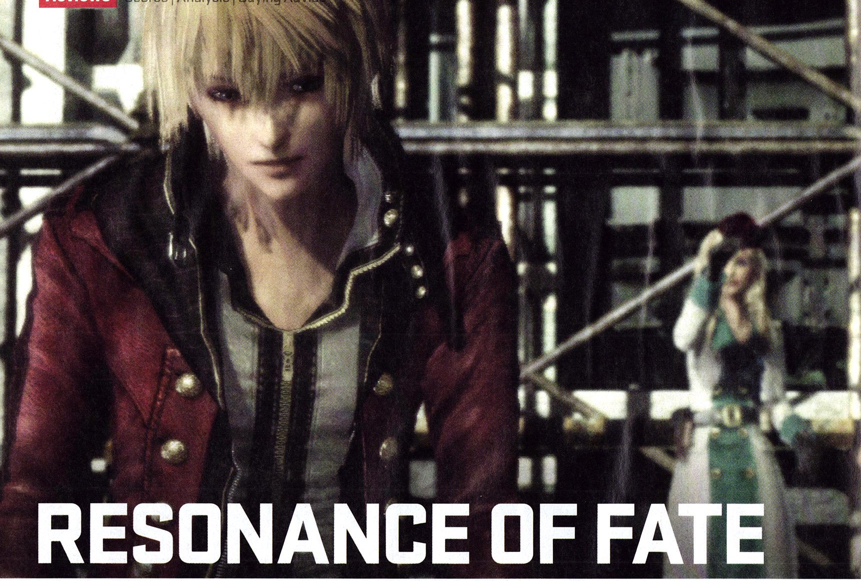
Small ball plus small screen equals tricky, frustrating, occasionally impressive baseball simming. It's weird. We've embarked on an epic season journey and suddenly realized that we're largely swinging at nothing while batting. It could be lint on the screen for all we can really make out. Like the PS3 big brother, that means batting is hard. Pitching—just a simple two-button click format—is easy, with good pitchers racking up 10-plus Ks every darn game. Even with a patient approach (Justin Duscherer rarely hits the strike zone, so the forced base runners ultimately lead to runs), Roy Oswalt fanned 15 in seven innings, thanks to our bad swings and his hitting every corner (and getting every call).

Taking part in the fun team Home Run Derby was great for understanding the pace and timing of swings, but even when the aiming reticule indicates the ball's location, it's all too easy to miss. We don't care for the addition of the Farm game, giving access to AAA teams and players, but we do appreciate being able to check our swings. We also don't care for the player unlikenesses, but do enjoy the portable Manager mode. And it's a shame the hit mechanic rarely produces foul balls, but impressive that outfielders can collide fielding pop flies. So as a game of hits and misses, you'll find plenty to moan about in the PSP *2K10* and just enough to keep you playing. | Alex Clark

Rating ★★★☆☆



↑ Pitching is just a two-click process, which means nailing location with your top starters is pretty simple.



RESONANCE OF FATE

Old dogs don't always need new tricks

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: tri-Ace

The naysayers claim Japanese role-playing games are dead or dying. Claiming it's a stale genre that's ever decreasing in popularity, these detractors would likely place *Resonance of Fate* directly in their crosshairs. Yet with a seemingly nonsensical title, traditional role-playing game style, and a winning combat system with other perks, *Resonance* shows even a "standard" JRPG can still be a fun time-sink.

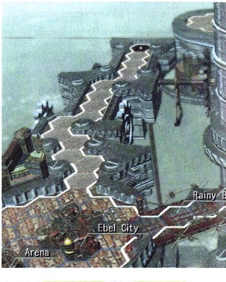
Taking place in a steampunk-ish future where humanity lives *Jetsons*-style above the clouds in a five-tiered elevated city, this tale of mercenaries versus clergy plods along. It took us a couple of hours to get a feel for traversing the world, another four to get a feel for the combat—and honestly, we're still not clear what the story was about.

The main cast is full of anime archetypes: There's the roguish, slightly perverted veteran; the young, emo pretty boy; and the plucky young lady. All are working together as mercenaries to make ends meet in a dystopian future. The mysterious antagonists are pretty rote, too, though a few, like the fanboyish Paeter, stand out. And the dreary, poorly directed voice-acting and slightly off lip-synching doesn't help, even with Nolan North (see sidebar) playing a shadow of Nathan Drake.

Resigned to fate

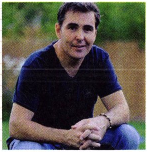
Though it took a long tutorial, once we entered the combat our experience rapidly improved. Developer tri-Ace provides a mix of turn-based and real-time trappings, similar to what they did so well in the *Star Ocean* and *Valkyrie Profile* games. Each of the three characters gets a turn, but once the characters start moving, the enemies begin their actions as well. It demands careful timing and planning, and each new area or enemy requires a unique strategy.

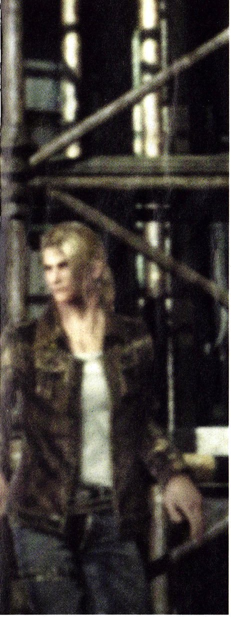
With so many combat rules to master in a very short time, *Resonance* can be pretty daunting. We thought we understood the rules a few hours in, then a function we were barely aware of finally clicked, and it was as if the whole game changed. With the increased risk/reward of the Limit Break–esque Basel system and the different environmental demands, fighting is easily the deepest part of the game. Those prepared to give their all learning the system will have a

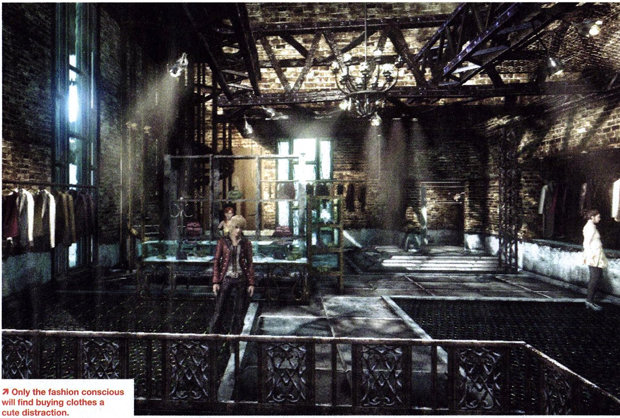


➔Nolan North: a plea

We love Nolan North. He's one of the best in his field and his marquee character, Nathan Drake, wouldn't be half as good without his voice. But as eating too much ice cream can cause a headache, hearing North's voice in every game is starting to get to us. Not only is he *Resonance of Fate's* Vashyron, he's had a lead role in at least three other games in 2010 alone. We don't wish to damn him with unemployment, but maybe he could say no to a couple of games? Or maybe develop an accent or two?

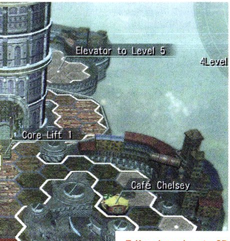






↗ Only the fashion conscious will find buying clothes a cute distraction.

> **“We thought we understood the combat rules a few hours in, then a function we were barely aware of finally clicked, and it was as if the whole game changed.”**



↖ If you've only got a SD TV, be prepared to squint when viewing the maps.

great time—once the tri-Attack system is mastered. Some frustration, however, is a given.

That's another quaint bit of retro gaming *Resonance* throws at you: it can be infuriatingly hard. Oh, it's very clear where the heroes need to go, too direct really, with job postings describing their destinations and a seemingly omniscient old man in the main town who will give explicit advice on what to do next. No, the pain comes when you get to the destination and fight. Expect to grind a lot before the game's bosses can be defeated, and expect to restart often, especially during one really crappy escort mission. We do appreciate a challenge, and it's possible to sidestep a reload of a previous save by spending in-game cash after a loss, but the game could go easier on us and still be a classic grindfest.

Old school, new look

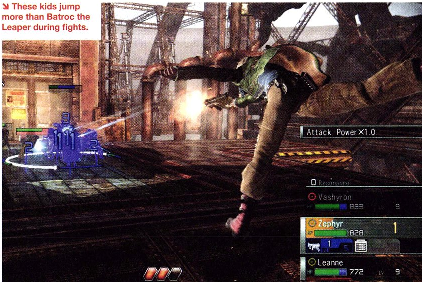
Anyone with eyes can see that *Resonance* is pretty, but with the nice graphics comes some caveats. The main characters look good, as do most of the monsters, but their movements are robotic, and while the cleverly designed world is visually satisfying, the fixed in-town camera would feel old on the PS2.

Fortunately dungeons and battles have a free-moving camera, while the overworld is a hex-based map that requires moving a cursor to get from place to place. Maybe that sounds cheap, but the puzzle-like way we used differently shaped pieces to reveal new areas was a satisfying distraction. We just wish we got more pieces from killing monsters; we often had to grind just to earn enough hexes to move ahead.

Resonance proves that traditional Japanese RPGs aren't dead, nor do they need to die. Yes, the game may have some uncreative genre trappings, but the great combat and interesting map structure are fresh, and even the established parts are still what fans look for in RPGs. If you prefer a traditional-style RPG instead of *Final Fantasy XIII* and its more experimental approach, your quest is over. | Henry Gilbert

Rating ★★★⯪☆

↘ These kids jump more than Batroc the Leaper during fights.



MOTOGP 09/10

Boss hoss

↖ ProTip: Try to stay ahead of the other guys.

PS3 PRICE: $49.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: Capcom DEVELOPER: Monumental Games

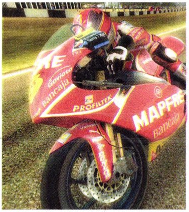
It's about time! *MotoGP* has finally decided to care about the rest of us this year. (Er, *years?* See sidebar.) Whereas this odd duck in Capcom's henhouse usually prides itself on catering to the most slavishly devoted crotch-rocketeer, *09/10* has cherry-picked several welcome additions from better, more accessible racing games. An accident-erasing "flashback" rewind similar to the one in the *Dirt* series, for example, as well as colored guidelines and mid-race milestones a la *Need For Speed SHIFT.*

To its credit, *09/10* has finally provided legitimate incentive for the armchair wheelman to progress through the seasons of the meaty Career mode, but make no mistake: While *MotoGP* isn't exclusively for the hardcore, it's still pretty damned hard. Rear brakes, countersteering, and biker aerodynamics—which are controlled by tucking with the X button—make this cycle a different kind of beast. Luckily, damn near everything can be customized, from difficulty level to traction control and assists, any time we're not on the pavement.

Perfect lines, overtakes, slipstreaming, and even randomly occurring micro-goals add cash and points to our Reputation (the universally accepted term for XP in racing games, apparently), which unlocked new sponsorships and staff members to acquire. Because we're not just the driver—we're the *boss*. So instead of simply upgrading engine parts, we hired different engineers and assigned them to "Research" specific aspects of our bike. And retaining the right PR minions landed us more lucrative deals and payouts. Sure, that makes for an incredibly unique progression, but it's also the furthest thing from instant gratification.

MotoGP 09/10 may sport the most elegantly rendered motorcyclists and hyper-realistic physics, but to get the full benefit, we had to re-race the same sterile tracks over and over again while performing a strategic juggling act through a sea of convoluted menus. Arcade and Championship modes offer quickplay at the expense of some of the new (and inclusive) features—which, while commendable, are nowhere near as well implemented when compared to the stellar crop of racing titles *MotoGP* borrowed from anyway. | Chris Antista

Rating ★★★☆☆



↓ The Suzuka Ferris Wheel makes its four-billionth appearance in a racing game.

↓ 09/10 = Two games in one?

Ahhh, September 10: A day that will live in… Wait, those are *years?* Straight out of the box, *MotoGP* features bikes, tracks, and weather that mirror the events of the real-world 2009 championship and 2010 season via free periodic DLC. Shhh… don't tell *Madden,* 'kay?

↗ Performing a powerslide results in a shot of turbo boost.

SONIC & SEGA ALL-STARS RACING

Ride on, Sonic, ride on

PS3 PRICE: $49.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Sumo Digital

Oh, we were skeptical, too. Taken at face value, *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing* looked like a desperate attempt by the company to cash in on its ailing stable of characters. Of course, all that melted away by the time we were playing as a Bonanza Brother chucking bombs off the back of a blimp in order to crash Tails, Ulala, and Crazy Taxi's B.D. Joe. Truly, this is one helluva history lesson.

Although it's from a genre long thought dead, *Sonic & Sega* skids into the winner's circle like a virile *House of the Dead* corpse (playable). No kart racer has ever looked this good. Not only do the Sonic-centric tracks embody the classic sights and sounds absent from the hedgehog's recent outings, but the courses based on lesser-known (and non-PlayStation) franchises—like *Jet Grind Radio* and *Samba de Amigo*—pop with displays of kaleidoscopic eye candy.

And it's not all glow and no show, either. The drift button, offering up to three levels of chargeable boost, provides just enough of a shot in the arm to elevate the familiar formula from stagnation. Mastering that mechanic alone will be the difference that separates casual and hardcore players racing through 60-plus missions and 24 lusciously referential courses on and offline.

Outside of the unique All-Star moves—generally an adrenaline-fueled throwback to each of the 20 characters' former glory—weapons and power-ups range from standard to lame. But the lack of newly forged territory won't matter much to old-timers. Forgive us for invoking the "Big N" here, but the thrills found in *Sonic & Sega* were far more *Smash Bros.* than *Mario Kart,* as progress unlocks a bevy of obscure characters and iconic music tracks.

Sega's late-to-the-Karty title offers great heaping gobs of over-the-top fan service in an extremely polished package. Kids'll love it, but it's lifetime adult gamers who'll truly relish this nod to a legacy a quarter-century in the making. | Chris Antista

Rating ★★★★☆

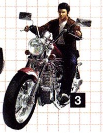
↗ Sonic has a fast car. He's got a ticket to get us out of here.

↘ Star Power?

When it came to mining Sega's past, no "All-Star" was too obscure. How many can you name?

1

2



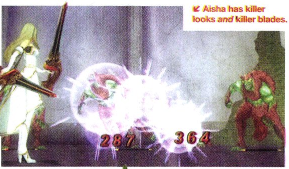
3

4

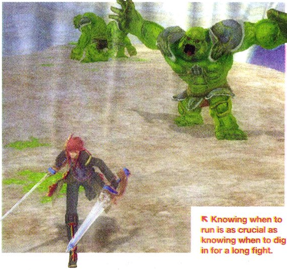
Answers: 1) Amigo, 2) Bonanza Bros., 3) Ryo (*Shenmue*), 4) Alex Kidd. If you guessed them all, buy the game!

POS 6 /8
LAP 7 /9

Characters take turns warping in and out of battle.



Aisha has killer looks *and* killer blades.



Knowing when to run is as crucial as knowing when to dig in for a long fight.

LAST REBELLION

A new take on turn-based

PS3 PRICE: $49.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: NIS America DEVELOPER: Hit Maker

The world has gone to hell and the dead just won't stay dead. What to do? If you're the gods in *Last Rebellion's* world, you'll enlist the aid of swordsmen ("blades") and enchantresses ("sealers") to restore order.

That's where we come in. As one of these tag-team duos, it's up to us to tuck in all those unruly beasts for a permanent dirt nap.

For reasons we won't spoil here, the dual heroes Nine and Aisha can't co-exist in the physical world at the same time, so they switch off during battles in the order of our choosing. Each has unique abilities and spells, but they both share a single pool of health, magic, and combo points. To attack, for example, we'd spend combo points to queue up physical blows targeting an enemy's specific body parts; nailing them in the correct order deals mega-damage, and cataloging these sequential weaknesses adds a pleasant puzzle vibe to engagements. Wounded limbs are also marked with a temporary stamp that, once branded, allows us to carpet-bomb all enemies' damaged extremities in one fell swoop. It's a cool system that feels really fresh.

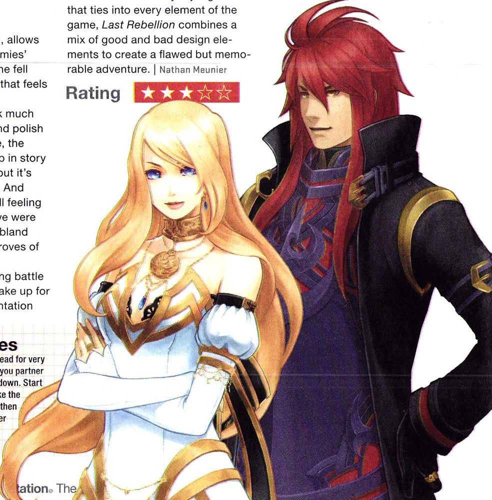
Too bad the visuals lack much of the technical flourish and polish found in other RPGs. Sure, the character art that crops up in story interactions is attractive, but it's also static—very last-gen. And we couldn't shake that dull feeling that took over whenever we were running around the large, bland environments filled with droves of monstrous thugs.

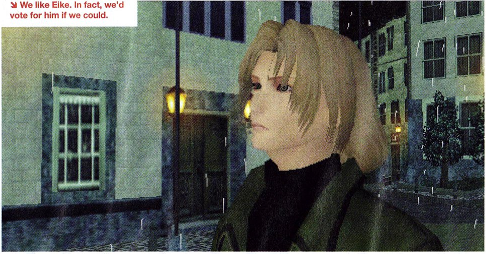
Last Rebellion's intriguing battle system doesn't entirely make up for the underwhelming presentation and old-school trappings, but it's remarkable how a game that draws so heavily on well-trodden JRPG tradition can still wind up being so unlike anything we've played before. Just like the yin/yang theme that ties into every element of the game, *Last Rebellion* combines a mix of good and bad design elements to create a flawed but memorable adventure. | Nathan Meunier

Rating ★★★☆☆

➔ Sealing Fates

Fallen adversaries won't stay dead for very long in *Last Rebellion*—unless you partner up to "persuade" them to stay down. Start with Nine's absorb ability to take the magical wind out of their sails, then finish up with Aisha's seal power to deliver the final blow. Now that's teamwork.





↘ We like Eike. In fact, we'd vote for him if we could.

SHADOW OF DESTINY

Fading into the darkness

PSP **PRICE:** $29.99 **ESRB:** Teen **PUBLISHER:** Konami **DEVELOPER:** Konami

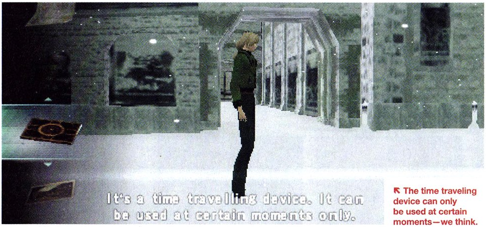
Can man defy fate? That question forms the core of *Shadow of Destiny,* a PSP port of Konami's 2001 PS2 game. *Destiny* sends its hero Eike on an adventure through time to prevent his own death. After being murdered during the game's opening credits, he's given a second lease on life by a mysterious being known as the Homunculus, who provides him with a time-travel device called the Z-pad.

With time on his side, Eike can prevent his murder in a dark alley by zapping into the past and assembling a crowd, thereby scaring off his would-be assassin. But just because he dodges death once doesn't mean it can be avoided altogether—Eike must make it through 10 chapters spanning hundreds of years to come out alive. Along the way he's helped by a fortuneteller, who alerts him to coming danger.

Despite the death-defying scenarios, there isn't much action here. Instead, *Destiny* offers up lengthy exposition before setting us off to wander the relatively barren streets of Lebensbaum, hoping to trigger an event or bump into the proper character to advance the plot.

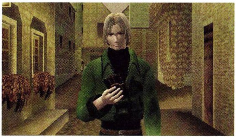
The moody graphics and compelling story remain impressive nearly a decade after its initial release, but *Shadow of Destiny* is showing its age. It offers good replay value with five alternate endings, but since the original PS2 game can be had for under $10, it's hard to justify the $30 price tag unless on-the-go time-travel puzzles are your priority. | Dan DiGiacomo

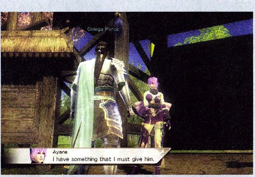
Rating ★★⯪☆☆



It's a time travelling device. It can be used at certain moments only.

↖ The time traveling device can only be used at certain moments—we think.





Ayane
I have something that I must give him.

↑ Ayane from Tecmo's *Dead or Alive* fighting game series makes a guest appearance here.

DYNASTY WARRIORS: STRIKEFORCE

The 10,000-year franchise goes on and on

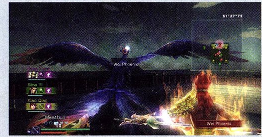
PS3 **PRICE:** $49.99 **ESRB:** Teen **PUBLISHER:** KOEI Tecmo **DEVELOPER:** Omega Force

Fans of the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise will be in familiar territory with *Strikeforce* as the Shu, Wei, and Wu clans once again battle to rule China. But at what price victory when you have to endure the flat textures, stuttering framerate, and repetitive level design of this PSP-to-PS3 port?

There are some compelling new gameplay additions including "Fury" transformations (player stats are raised and even flight can be enabled) and "Officer Cards" (officers' skill sets are enhanced during a battle's planning stage), along with an online component that serves up team-based battles or four-warrior co-op.

If you're a *Dynasty Warriors* addict or a gamer who values quantity-over-quality and demands endless gaming mileage for your $50 (200 quests, 40 playable characters), *Strikeforce* is a solid enough offering. | Russell Garbutt

Rating ★★★☆☆

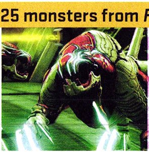


↑ Those Dynasty Warriors. Always with the fighting and never with the making of the cereal.

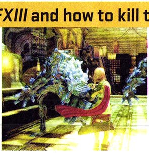
Monster Mash

THE FUTURISTIC, GORGEOUS-LOOKING worlds of *Final Fantasy XIII's* Cocoon and Pulse are filled with many weird and wonderful creatures, all of which want to dance a victory jig over your cooling corpse. It's up to you to not give them a chance. Here's our favorite 25 creatures to destroy.

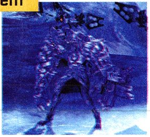
25 monsters from *FFXIII* and how to kill them



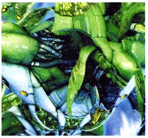
PANTHERON
They may be the most basic, and some of the first enemies that you'll meet, but with sharp teeth and big claws the Pantheron does have a strong bite. Often seen in packs, take them out one by one with plenty of physical attacks.



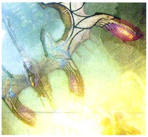
CIE'TH
L'Cie are people tasked by the god-like Fal'Cie to carry out a Focus. If they fail, they turn into reanimated corpses called the Cie'th. These tragic creatures are no real threat, but they cry in grating mechanical voices when you hit them.



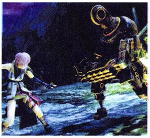
WIGHT
These flying Cie'ths hang around with their land-based brethren. Adorned with hexagonal wings, they swoop towards you with alarming speed. Knock them out of the sky with coordinated physical strikes before you start on the other enemies.



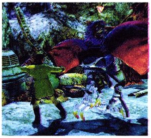
ALPHA BEHEMOTH
This mammoth monster lurks around the icy shores of Lake Bresha. He may look like a tough cookie, but he's weak against Fire and Water. Rotate between both spells to fill his Stagger gauge quickly before going in for the kill.



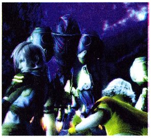
GARUDA
In the sky! A leathery bird! Wait...is that...a face...on its bottom? If you can tear your eyes off of this anatomically bizarre mutation, you might want to work on Staggering the Garuda, to bring down its physical and magical barriers.



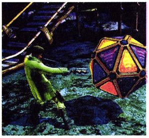
PULSEWORK SOLDIER
This robo-baddie that you'll meet at Vile Ends is as hard as nails. It spins its torso around for strong physical blows, and its heavy plating makes for high defense rates. If you Stagger him, his body opens up like a terrified jack-in-the-box.



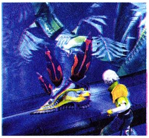
INCUBUS
This demented hybrid is what nightmares are all about. Well, apart from the one where we're back in school... naked and... Er, *anyhoo*...it dances like a chicken, before kicking you with its claws. Use Water spells to severely cramp its style.



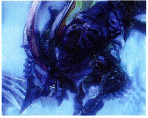
UHLAN
If you come across one of these flying PSICOM units, chances are it's paired up with a footsoldier, who'll plant a tracking beacon near your team. Destroy the beacon straight away—the Uhilo lobs guided missiles right in that direction.



BOMB
FF fans will recognize the name only, because this enemy has taken a newer, weirder appearance. Now a floating icosahedron, it's still vulnerable to Water and Ice attacks, and self-destructs if you're not offensive from the get-go.

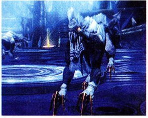


FRAG LEECH
These brightly colored slugs are pretty cute, especially when they slither around trying to savage your knees. When those red spikes retract, it's preparing to throw itself into your face. Yes, it might sound frightening, but these guys are easy to stomp on.



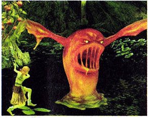
FERAL BEHEMOTH

This is what the Behemoth looks like before PSICOM tranforms it into a military monster. Seeing as he's been tested on in a lab, he's pretty angry about everything, especially those Water spells you keep chucking at him. They're his fatal weakness.



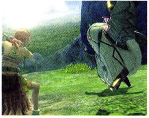
SILVER LOBO

Like the Behemoth, the wolf-like Silver Lobo is the Pantheron's original form, before PSICOM's science bots stick a bunch of neon lights on its fur. It's still pretty vicious and attacks in packs, but there's no real threat here. Just whack him with physical blows.



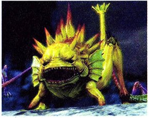
FLANDRAGORA

Looks like a throwback from *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes,* right? Acts like one too, trying to drip tomato goo all over your shoes. Roast it with some Fire spells, and it won't be any trouble. Season well and serve with balsamic vinegar (sorry).



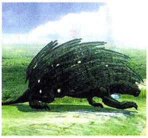
GREMLIN

It's hard to raise your hand to something so adorable (look at those tiny wings). But hey, these little buggers are trying to kill you, so it's only fair that you blow them away with Wind-based magic attacks. Survival of the fittest and all that.



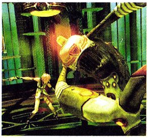
MUD FROG

This spiky headed frog treats you to a little hopping two-step called the Courtship Dance when it gets excited. As sexy as that sounds, it summons more frogs to his amphibian aid. Kill his libido with a bolt of well-placed Thunder.



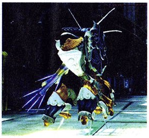
SCALE BEAST

It's best to avoid these huge armored beasts, because those rock-solid plates mean it's immune to, well, everything. However, if you manage to Stagger it, throw every single Thunder, Fire, and Water spell you have at its exposed behind.



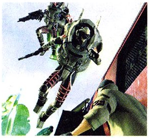
FLANITOR

The Flanitor—presumably in his day off from the cleaning, maintenance, and security of a specialty pastry factory—sports a hard hat topped with a little flashing light. He even has a siren that goes off when he throws Cure spells at his allies.



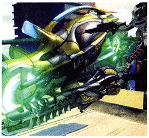
ORION

This resplendent mechanical beast leads the charge for the Guardian Core troops, who are swarming the streets of PalumPolum. Tottering around on four spider-like legs, it looks easy enough to topple. Spam it with Blizzard and Water spells.



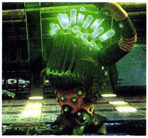
PSICOM AERIAL SNIPER

You can't run, and you certainly can't hide, from these flying soldiers. Having a jet engine strapped to their backs means that these military men won't even blink at Earth spells like Quake. Zap them with Thunder instead.



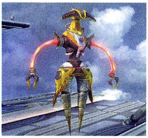
FALCO VELOCYCLE

Floating motorcycles are bad enough, but this one is capable of depleting your entire health bar when it unloads its Gatling gun. Best way to avoid instant death is to switch to Sentinel and cling on to that Steelguard. Don't forget about your Cure spells.



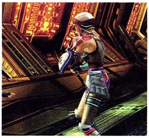
FLANBORG

A big blob of rubber goo, who hangs out with the Flanitor. While this cripples his standing at society parties, the Flanborg will attempt to heal his buddy when possible. Take him out first, then focus on his gooey pal.



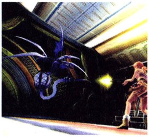
DECKDRONE

Robots are awesome. Especially the ones that guard the Palamecia warship and sport bendy arms that bring a comical appeal to a rather hardcore foe. Although fond of drilling your face in, it's weak against Fire and Blizzard spells.



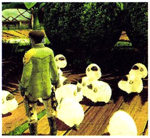
PSICOM HUNTRESS

These feisty ladies are elite PSICOM fighters found on the Palamecia. When you attack, they'll cast stat-boosting spells, so dispel these before going in for the kill. And no, they're not free to go out for drinks after the battle.



VESPID

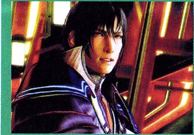
We're okay with bees, but what worries us is the Vespid's wobbly, liquid-filled belly—it's mesmerising enough to distract us from its Thunder spells. Just hit it with everything you have and you'll take it down without too much trouble.



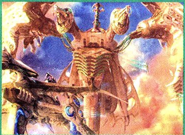
MINI SHEEP

Okay, you don't get to hack up these wee wooly beasties with an oversized sword, but we had to show them to you because they're so *darn cute.* Residents of Nautilus themepark, they bop around the petting zoo, baa'ing like tiny lambs.

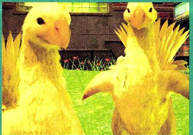
FINAL FANSERVICE FOUR OF OUR FINAL FANTASY FAVORITES, BACK AGAIN IN FFXIII



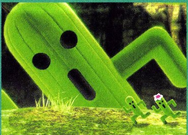
CID RAINES Cid has appeared in all the *FFs* (apart from the first), assuming a new persona each time. Despite being a different person, he's always linked to airships somehow, like *FFXIII's* Cid Raines who commands the *Lindblum.*



THE LINDBLUM Speaking of which, this majestic airship appeared in *FFIX,* helmed by Regent Cid Fabool IX. It's only fit that it appears again in *XIII* as the flagship for military unit Guardian Core, captained by Cid Raines.

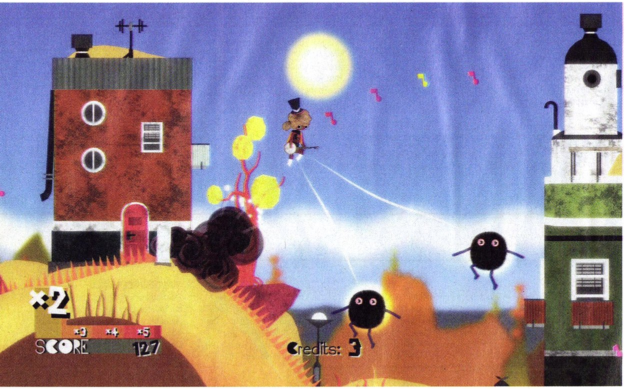


CHOCOBOS It's certainly not a *FF* game if the loveable chocobo isn't present. Providing an alternative method of transport since 1984, these bright yellow birds are all too happy to carry you around on their feathery backs.



CACTUAR He may look tiny and feeble, but this spiky customer can bring you down with his signature 1000 Needle attack. He's a *FF* stalwart, but this time around he's found a lady friend. Thanks, Match.com!

PlayStation Network Games



Fret Nice

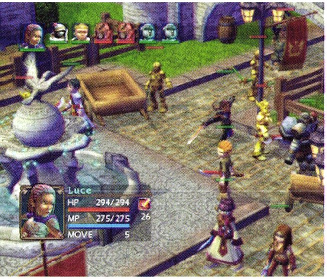
PRICE: $14.99 **ESRB:** Everyone **PUBLISHER:** Tecmo **DEVELOPER:** Pieces Interactive

+ And so the musical battle between nerd rock and heavy metal rages on. *Fret Nice* puts us on the front lines with a guitar in hand and a desire to crank out some (literally) killer chords to smite the monstrous minions of darkness.

This highly original and wildly colorful musical platformer hinges on using a *Guitar Hero*-style controller to tilt, strum, and fretboard tap our character's way through some amazingly designed levels. In order to take down enemies with blasts of rock-'n'-roll awesomeness, we have to pay attention to their physical features (number of eyes, horns, fangs, etc.) and input the proper series of corresponding note combinations to unleash our guitar-virtuoso mojo.

The guitar controls are a sweet idea that are absolutely worth noodling with, but the fact we have to be in mid-air to execute attacks is a little tricky. Not everyone will love the experimental setup and most players will probably opt to play more comfortably with the standard controller. Either way, this rocking adventure is truly entertaining.

Each level is loaded with stuff to collect and secrets to uncover; we often had to replay previous stages in order to earn badge quotas to unlock the path ahead. But it's easy to keep chugging ahead due to the game's considerable charm. Hands down, *Fret Nice* brings the rock. | Nathan Meunier



Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment

PRICE: $14.99 **ESRB:** Teen **PUBLISHER:** Konami **DEVELOPER:** Hijinx Studios

– A prequel to the original *Vandal Hearts, Flames of Judgment* struggles unsuccessfully to break free of its mediocre shackles. The painfully generic quest follows a gaggle of young warrior punks, orphaned by war and Armageddon, who haphazardly take on a bevy of evil forces. The turn-based strategy missions provide some decent encounters, but the oversimplified battle system doesn't offer much depth or excitement. Unfortunately, the game's one attempt at being different—a newly added kids-oriented cartoon presentation—just doesn't jive with the grim and bloody tone of the adventure. | NM

PSone Fun

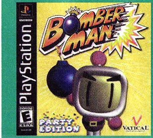
Can't miss classics—now available on PSN

PlayStation
WING COMMANDER IV

Wing Commander IV: The Price of Freedom

PS3/PSP | PRICE: $5.99 | **ESRB:** Teen

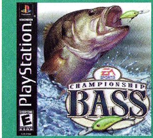
The galaxy needs saving. Are you ready? Pilot a missile-laden space fighter and face off against huge capital ships.



Bomberman Party Edition

PS3/PSP | PRICE: $5.99 | **ESRB:** Everyone

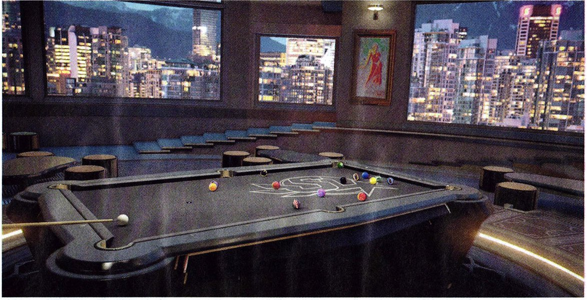
The old-school bomb-flinging ninja action may seem simple, but it's insidiously addictive. It's fun to blow up your friends!



Championship Bass

PS3/PSP | PRICE: $5.99 | **ESRB:** Everyone

Why listen to Gramps' old fish tales when you can make your own? Hooking a virtual bass does have its thrills.



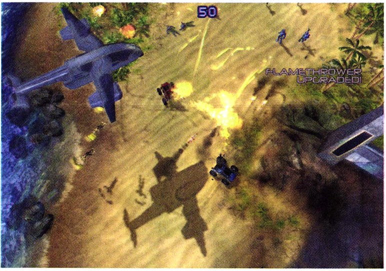
Hustle Kings

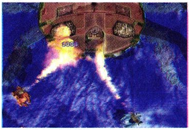
PRICE: $9.99 **ESRB:** Everyone **PUBLISHER:** SCEA **DEVELOPER:** VooFoo Studios

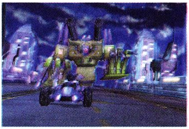
At a glance, *Hustle Kings* seems like just another pool hall simulator—but don't be fooled. The game's slick photo-realistic visuals were enough to draw us in, but once we dug into the finely honed billiards gameplay, the real depth and beauty quickly become apparent.

Hustle Kings doesn't get fancy with any flashy gimmicks. It simply delivers rock-solid gameplay built around simple-to-grasp shot mechanics and a glut of play options. Precise aim control makes it a real breeze to visually plan shots and get the ball to go where we intended. We could also apply all manner of spin and aiming calculations to make the ball do some crazy tricks. However, pulling off skill tricks by aligning the quickly rotating circular shot meter with the sweet spot does requires speedy reflexes. Being off a bit might not ruin the shot, but severely botched timing can send the ball flying off the table. (Tip: Grind some chalk onto the cue to offset the inevitable wear and tear that'll affect your shots.)

Virtual cash earned in the multi-tiered challenge-based campaign can be used to purchase extras in the game's online storefront, and the quick-play and online multiplayer modes are great in a pinch. | NM







Assault Heroes

PRICE: $9.99 **ESRB:** Teen **PUBLISHER:** Konami **DEVELOPER:** Wanako Games

It may have taken a while for *Assault Heroes* to finally reach the PS3, but it's worth the wait for fans of twitchy arcade shooters. This flamethrower-infused rampage through armies of cybernetic soldiers is straightforward, but satisfying.

We might be the lone survivor of an elite military unit sent to uncover a secret underground weapons facility, but that's not stopping the enemy from opening the floodgates on swarms of robotic minions sent to tear us to shreds. Good thing we've got a souped-up 4x4 armed with machine guns, a flamethrower, and a massive cannon.

One thumbstick controls the treads—perfect for running over nearby peons—while the other lets us pump hot lead into insanely huge mechanical abominations. Each of the main weapons can be upgraded to boost our robot slaughtering potential. And if our pimped-out death jeep eats it, we still have one more sporting chance to stick it to our enemies on foot (although all of our hard-earned armament upgrades are lost). Some specific areas also required us to hop out of our vehicle and hoof it through underground complexes, and there are water levels where we zipped around in a floating tank.

Although there's nothing really innovative about *Assault Heroes,* it's a tightly woven shooter that offers some heavy-duty solo or co-op fun. | NM

Play On

Must-have add-ons from the PlayStation Store

Assassin's Creed 2
Battle of Forli

Price: $3.99 | **ESRB:** Mature

This newly "repaired" animus sequence (12) fills in a missing piece of the game's story and lets you stabby-stabby your way through the heated Battle of Forli.

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
PlayStation Heroes Pack

Price: $4.99 | **ESRB:** Mature

Visually spice up *Uncharted 2's* competitive online multiplayer modes by donning the flesh of seven different PlayStation heroes from *Killzone 2, Resistance 2,* and *inFamous.*

SingStar viewer

SingStar Viewer

Price: Free | **ESRB:** Not Rated

This free download offers an instant gateway into the bustling online *SingStar* community, letting you browse the SingStore or view crazy community videos.

2012

AVAILABLE: April 1 (Download Rental)
GENRE: Action, Sci-Fi
STUDIO: Columbia Pictures / Sony Pictures Home Ent.

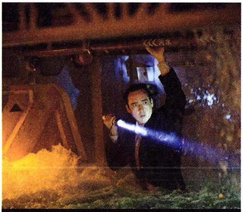
"The world, as we know it, will soon come to an end."

PSN Video Delivery Service Spotlight

What we're downloading to our PS3 this month

It's the end of the world as we know it, so naturally Roland Emmerich will be there waiting for us. Anyone who's seen *The Day After Tomorrow* or *Independence Day* knows the producer/director's films are high on apocalyptic spectacle but low on coherent plot, and *2012* doesn't disappoint on either count. Yes, the Mayans tried to warn us, but humankind's end is nigh and we regrettably passed on the flood insurance. Cue the devastation of biblical proportions and requisite last-minute ark building—there's still time for one last special-effects smorgasbord before we go.

Why We're Watching



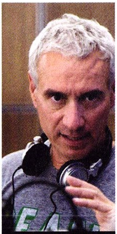
John Cusack is our role model. *Better Off Dead, Say Anything,* and *High Fidelity* practically mirror our life experience so we're hangin' with him 'til the end.

"So the ground just opens up and the plane barely takes off and buildings start falling on top of it and then California falls into the ocean…"

100%
NATURAL

No alien invasion, no man-made apocalypse, no artificial preservatives—just pure disaster like Mother Nature intended.

'Cause we need a new calendar and this Mayan one's classically stylish and goes all the way up to 2012. Puts those 15-month jobbies to shame.



"The crowning achievement in Emmerich's long, profitable career as a destroyer of worlds."
– *Dan Kois,* Washington Post

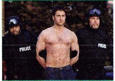
Top VDS Downloads

MOVIES

- *Law Abiding Citizen*
- *Zombieland*
- *Dante's Inferno*
- *Cirque du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant*
- *Justice League: Crisis on Two Earths*

TV SHOWS

- *Smallville: Season 9*
- *Family Guy: Season 8*
- *Lost: Season 6*
- *Aqua Teen Hunger Force: Season 8*
- *Caprica The Series: Season 1*



↑ Believe it or not, someone here doesn't eat doughnuts.

READERS!

PlayStation The Official Magazine
REVIEW GRUDGE MATCHES
WORLD FIRST REVIEW
UNCHARTED 2
PlayStation The Official Magazine
WORLD EXCLUSIVE
JAMES CAMERON'S NEW BLOCKBUSTER
AVATAR THE GAME
The entertainment event of the decade
REVIEWED
CRAZY! Batman: Arkham Asylum
PUNCHY! Dissidia Final Fantasy
BLOODY! Call of Juarez 2
HOW TO...

PlayStation: The Official Magazine needs your input!

You can help us make PlayStation: The Official Magazine even better by taking our short survey at:

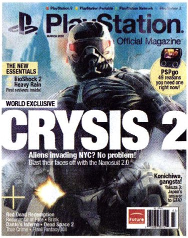
www.playstationthemagazine.com/magsurvey2010 before June 1, 2010.

We need your voice to let us know how we can make your favorite magazine even better, so don't be shy!

Survey Rules & Regulations:
By filling out the survey, you (and, if you are a minor, your parents or legal guardians) release Future US, Survey Monkey, and any of their respective parent companies, subsidiaries, affiliates, directors, officers, employees and agencies (collectively, the "Released Parties") from any liability whatsoever, and waive any and all causes of action, related to any claims, costs, injuries, losses, or damages of any kind arising out of or in connection with the survey. The sponsor of the survey is Future US, Inc. ("Future US"), 4000 Shoreline Court, South San Francisco, CA 94080). Future US, Inc. cannot be responsible for lost, late, misdirected, or incomplete entries. Sony is not a sponsor of this survey. *LittleBigPlanet* and *Sackboy* are trademarks or registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. All rights reserved. LittleBigPlanet™ for PS3™ and LittleBigPlanet.com are developed by Media Molecule.

PlayStation.
The Official Magazine

Letters


PlayStation Official Magazine
March 2010
THE NEW ESSENTIALS
BioShock 2
Heavy Rain
First reviews inside!
PSPgo
49 reasons you need one right now!
WORLD EXCLUSIVE
CRYSIS 2
Aliens invading NYC? No problem!
Blast their faces off with the Nanosuit 2.0
Konichiwa, gangsta!
Yakuza 3: Japan's answer to GTA?
Red Dead Redemption
Resonance of Fate • Brink
Dante's Inferno • Dead Space 2
True Crime • Final Fantasy XIII

▲ This month's conversation starter

> **"What about the rest of us who just want to be taken by the hand to the next place and just kick the crap out of everyone?"** ➔

MOSTLY DEAD ↗

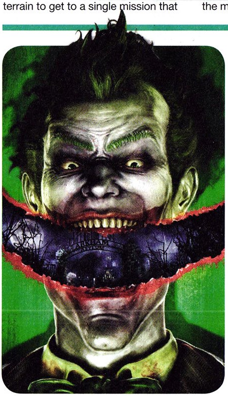
I read an article a few issues back that stated that the shooter is dead. Why would this be, and why is it so necessary to incorporate RPG elements in the beloved shooter genre? I don't specifically have anything against RPGs as a whole, but I think too many of them are poorly developed. I don't find it exciting when I have to play 50-plus missions that are basically the same thing over and over again or when I have to traverse stretches of terrain to get to a single mission that will send me another 50 miles to go kill some drug dealer or something. (Can you hear me *Far Cry 2?)*

What's wrong with games like the original *Far Cry* and *Red Faction* 1 and 2? How about the first two *Resistance* games and *Killzone* 1 and 2? I can understand that some people need a change, but what about the rest of us who just want to be taken by the hand to the next place and just kick the crap out of everyone? Hell, isn't that what a multiplayer game is for the most part—everyone taking turns killing each other to see who racks up the most kills? These are some of the most popular games around. I just don't get it. | *Frank, via email*

Fine, you're right—shooters aren't dead. (And to be fair, we were being hyperbolic. It's what we do in magazines.) But our point still stands: Today's gamers demand a more sophisticated experience. Linear shooters like *Killzone 2* have grown up a lot since the days of *Doom.* They won't ever disappear entirely, but they will continue to evolve.

Send your thoughts and comments to PTOM_Letters@futureus.com. Unless you're that Nigerian prince who keeps emailing us. We're on to you.

We welcome reader photos, letters, and stories ("Submissions"), however, we cannot promise to publish any Submission and none will be returned. Neither PlayStation: The Official Magazine ("PTOM") nor Future US, Inc. shall be liable for loss or damage to any Submission. By sending in your Submissions to PTOM you represent and warrant that you own or otherwise have all necessary rights to the Submissions to allow us to publish them in PTOM and as follows. You grant PTOM a worldwide, royalty-free, perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive right and fully sub-licensable license to use, copy, distribute, publish, modify, adapt, translate, and store, your Submissions, in any form, format, or medium, of any kind now known or later developed and to use your name, likeness, and any other information in connection with the use of the Submission you provide.



LETTER OF THE MONTH

GUT FEELINGS

Do you know what a duodenum is? I didn't—that is, until I developed an ulcer on this mysterious body part. (For those wondering, it's a part of the small intestines.) If my ulcer were an award, I would dedicate it to people like Peter, the writer of March's letter of the month. I think I speak for many when I ask (in my best Joker voice), "Why so serious?" I play videogames to escape the qualities that Peter seeks in his games. If I want complete reality and harsh consequences, I will turn off my PS3 and head out into the "real world." Or I could just call my mother. I will leave my new friend Peter with the words of the great philosopher Bugs Bunny: "Don't take life too seriously. You'll never get out alive!" | *Jason Bickings, Santa Ana, CA*

Intestinal disorders, *The Dark Knight,* and a well-worn adage from Bugs Bunny—all in a letter about videogames? If that isn't a recipe for Letter of the Month, we don't know what is. Kudos, Jason. Enjoy your escapism!

skate
3
FORT CARVERTON

Jason's LOTM nabs him a *Skate 3* deck!

BIG GUNS ➔

I was just wondering how you guys determine who reviews what game. Seeing as how Gary's the new editor in chief, I guess that means he gets to review every big game that comes out like *Heavy Rain* or *Final Fantasy XIII*. What about the other games? Does the rest of staff just draw straws for each game or what? | *Gex1040, Canada*

Oh we'll tell you how we decide, Gex: Nerf guns at high noon. Last man standing gets first choice.

MOTION SICKNESS

I know there's a lot of hype for the new PS3 motion controller coming soon, but I'm not as excited as everyone else. I like more traditional gaming with just a regular controller. I don't think I would be able to play *Uncharted 3* (when it comes out) with motion controls. Also, I don't want gameplay to be downsized because of the limits of motion controls. I think games should support both types of controllers so everyone could get their way. | *Jacob, via email*

Well, you don't have to worry too much, Jacob. The majority of the games that'll use the motion controller are being specifically designed for the new system—meaning there's no way you'll be waving wands to guide Nathan Drake through his next adventure. In fact, Sony only plans to release between 10 and 20 motion controller games this year, so traditional gamepads definitely won't be going anywhere for a while.

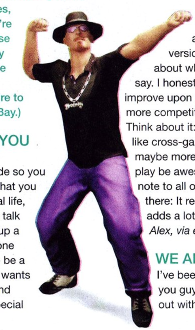
COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

I want to comment on the March letter about headset use. When I first got my PS3, I was excited to try the voice chat during online play, but my excitement quickly wore off. Sure, it sometimes comes in handy during gameplay, but when you are in the lobby, all you hear is derogatory, abusive comments. It goes beyond normal trash talk. When I play *Modern Warfare 2,* I end up muting most of the gamers with mics because they're either questioning someone's sexuality, making racist remarks, or broadcasting their music for everyone. | *Terry Gray Coonradt, Willimantic, CT*

We know what you're talking about, Terry, but anytime you combine competition, anonymity, and the internet, you're going to have jerks like the ones you described. Our recommendation? Build a solid Friends List out of the more rational players you encounter so you'll have reasonable gaming partners.

Tony's letter in the March issue had some things to say about those not using or having a headset: "You're ruining the play experience of others." I could not disagree more. Can he and others understand that maybe *their* all-too-serious style ruins the play experience of others? Not everyone wants to go online and play as if they're in a Michael Bay film. | *Michael, Lancaster, OH*

The intensity of hardcore gamers is grating at times, but at least they're annoying because they want to play well. (And, for the record, no one should *ever* aspire to be like Michael Bay.)



AN ASS OF YOU AND ME ➔

Games were made so you could do things that you couldn't do in real life, so I propose you talk to Sony and set up a pimp sim. Everyone secretly wants to be a pimp but no one wants to go to prison and be someone's special friend, so make a game where you can be a pimp. And when this game is huge, I wouldn't mind a little extra gaming money. | *Rodes, via email*

Alright Rodes, we'll pass along your idea…so long as you agree to give us the majority of your royalties in exchange for our protection.

PSN TO THE PEOPLE

I really hope Sony doesn't decide to start charging extra for online play/features. The fact that PSN is free to use is a major selling point for the PS3. And really, who can afford another monthly subscription fee right now? It's fine for DLC, but not out-of-the-box gameplay. If I had to pay extra to play *Modern Warfare 2* online, I probably just wouldn't buy the game in the first place. I'd stick to games with an offline focus. | *Seth Heiserman, via email*

As far as we know, PSN will remain free. True, there's been some chatter about a "premium" PSN that'd cost a nominal monthly fee, but even if such a system were implemented, the majority of PSN's features—including online play—would remain free. So try to look on the bright side like Alex here:

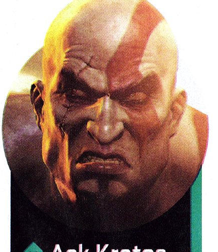
So I have read things about PSN getting a for-pay, premium version and was curious about what you guys have to say. I honestly think it will vastly improve upon PSN and make it more competitive with Xbox LIVE. Think about it: Wouldn't features like cross-game chat, parties, and maybe more dependable online play be awesome? And a side note to all of the skeptics out there: It really is worth it and adds a lot to the experience. | *Alex, via email*

WE ARE NOT SONY

I've been wondering when you guys are going to come out with any add-ons for *MAG* 'cause it says on the back of the box that there is add-on content, but I can't find any. | *Zach, via email*

NO, SERIOUSLY, WE'RE NOT SONY

Dear PTOM, my name is Austin and I cannot remember my password to log into my PSP's PSN account and I'm starting to get a little mad and I was only wondering if you could email me my password so I can get into my account. | *Austin, Bristow, IA*



↑ Ask Kratos

I was hoping with *God of War III* coming up that Sony would make a movie about it. I'm sure it will be awesome. I love the *God of War* series and I know that the new version of *Clash of the Titans* is coming soon, but I would like to see *GoW* have its own movie or series. | *Cameren Ceniceros, via email*

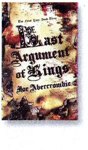
IS IT NOT ENOUGH THAT MY ANGUISH HAS BEEN REDUCED TO A GAME FOR YOUR PETTY AMUSEMENT? HAS MY ENDLESS SUFFERING NOT QUENCHED YOUR SELFISH AND UNTHINKING THIRST FOR ENTERTAINMENT? FOR YEARS YOU HAVE FEASTED ON MY UNCEASING TORMENT AND RAGE, AND YET YOU DEMAND MORE? I SHALL DESTROY YOU!

➘ Et Cetera All the other stuff that distracts PTOM

2011 Honda CR-Z | Automobile | $20,000-ish

Roger isn't a tree-hugging hippie-type, but he still misses the '89 CRX Si that he owned once upon a time. Like its progenitor, the new CR-Z aims to be sporty and fun—and may be the first hybrid vehicle that actually has a soul. Suck it, Prius owners!

Last Argument of Kings Book | $15.98



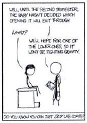
Oh, Logen Ninefingers—will you ever find peace? Gary is halfway through the final book in his favorite fantasy trilogy from the past decade, and he's already feeling nostalgic about having to eventually part ways with the noble barbarian at the center of this epic storm.

Mojo Nixon & Skid Roper – Frenzy Album | $5.99 on Amazon.com

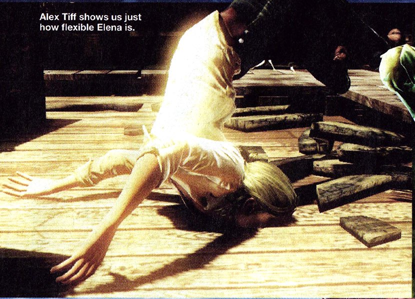
Mojo Nixon is rock's Vodka Drunkenski: well-lubricated, but decidedly un-PC and doomed to suffer for it. Here, Nixon and his pal Skid Roper produce a goofy, gutsy album complete with hits to hum like "Jesus at McDonald's." Greg considers *Frenzy* irrefutable proof that we elected the wrong Nixon.

XKCD | Web Comic | Free

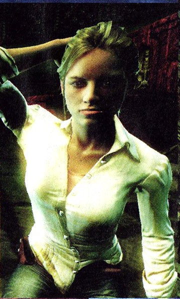
Despite its constant (though good-natured) belittling of the arts and humanities, the consistently clever science and pop culture-based web comic XKCD has long been one of Scott's favorite stops on his daily tour of the internet. So he figured it was probably time for him to share it with all of you. Head to Xkcd.com now!

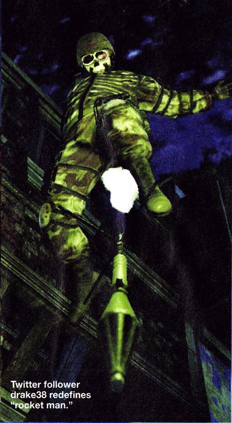

WELL, UNTIL THE SECOND TRIMESTER, THE BABY HASN'T DECIDED WHICH OPENING IT WILL EXIT THROUGH
WHAT?
WELL HOPE FOR ONE OF THE LOWER ONES, SO IT WON'T BE FIGHTING GRAVITY.
DO YOU KNOW YOU CAN JUST BUY LAB COATS?

From the Community



Alex Tiff shows us just how flexible Elena is.



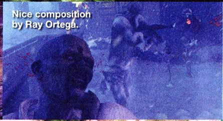


Twitter follower drake38 redefines "rocket man."

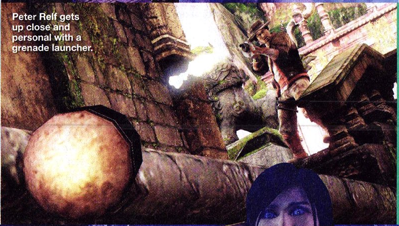
Among Photographers

The world's greatest *Uncharted 2* screenshots, provided by you

Are you following us on Twitter yet (twitter.com/P_TOM)? Well you should be! We recently asked our Twitter followers to share their finest *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* screenshots. Naturally, given the extreme talent and brutal handsomeness of our general readership, the results ranged from hilarious goofs to spectacular works of art. We've selected just a few of our favorites to share: A huge thanks to readers Alex Tiff, Shaun Fox, Travis Wycoff, Ian McDonald, Jonathan Acheson, Peter Relf, Ray Ortega, and Drake38 for their amazing shots.



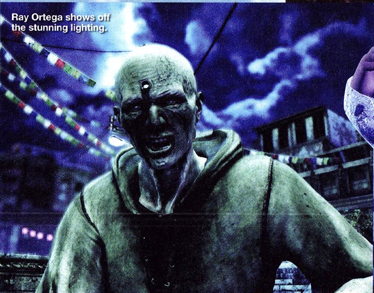
Nice composition by Ray Ortega.



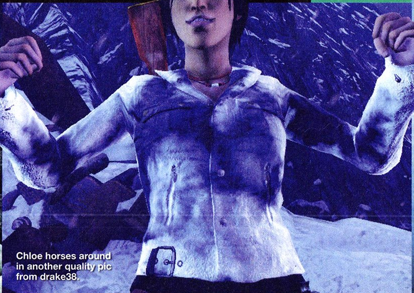
Peter Relf gets up close and personal with a grenade launcher.

Want to get in on the action?

Just load up a recording of an online match in "Cinema" mode. From there, you can change the camera angle, add effects, and save a capture to your hard drive. Then all you have to do is email it to yourself, your friends, or your favorite gaming magazine.



Ray Ortega shows off the stunning lighting.



Chloe horses around in another quality pic from drake38.

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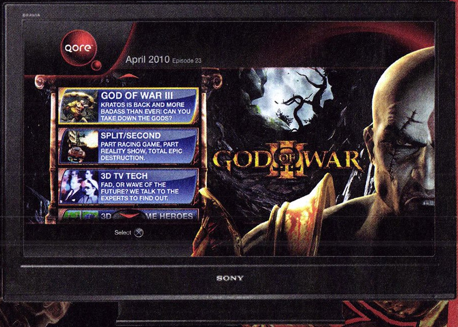
QORE EPISODE 23

Featuring God of War III, Split/Second, 3D TV Tech, 3D Dot Game Heroes



GOD OF WAR III
KRATOS IS BACK AND MORE BADASS THAN EVER! CAN YOU TAKE DOWN THE GODS?

SPLIT/SECOND
PART RACING GAME, PART REALITY SHOW, TOTAL EPIC DESTRUCTION.

3D TV TECH
FAD, OR WAVE OF THE FUTURE? WE TALK TO THE EXPERTS TO FIND OUT.

3D ME HEROES

April is supposed to be the month where the sun finally has a hint of real warmth to it, the flowers start blooming, and everything seems right with the world after the long, cold winter. Right? Not if Kratos has his way! With *God of War III* unleashed upon us, there's definitely a sinister edge to our episode this month.

Our tech team has also been hard at work, and we've got some cool interactive new features to show you in our *God of War III* section. So if you're sick of adorable, fluffy bunny rabbits, blooming flowers, and warm sunshine, let Qore be your antidote.

Qore is available for purchase from the PlayStation Network for $2.99 an episode, or $24.99 for a 13-episode subscription. Subscribers have access to Betas, demos, themes, and additional downloadable content each month.

AVAILABLE APRIL 1!

Download on the PlayStation™ Network.

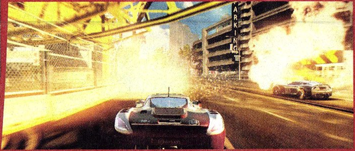
Featuring

God of War III

We've been waiting for *God of War* to come to the PS3 in an all-new next-gen title for years! Finally, all our hard waiting (and hard work from the developers at Sony's Santa Monica Studio) has paid off! We make the trip down to So-Cal to chat about the entire process of Kratos' ascension from the Underworld with game director Stig Asmussen. From visual and QuickTime events to weapons and level design, we cover all the bases.

Split/Second

What could be more exciting than racing through winding city streets at top speed? How about the knowledge that at any moment, a helicopter carrying a semi-trailer truck could take out the bridge in front of you, sending you careening off the side of the highway? In the world of reality TV high-stakes racing, anything is possible! *Split/Second* has a new spin on the racing genre, and they put your finger on the action trigger.



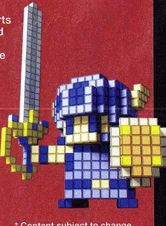
Photograph by Mark Madeo

3D TV Tech

If you thought your decked-out home theater system couldn't get any more awesome, just wait until you see the 3D technology coming to your living room soon. We were a little skeptical of this new trend, so we traveled around the world talking to experts in the 3D field to learn everything we could about it. From England to Las Vegas and back to California again: We'll show you the next dimension of television technology.

3D Dot Game Heroes

If all this high-tech stuff has made you feel nostalgic for a simpler time, check out *3D Dot Game Heroes*. This 8-bit inspired title lets you model your own characters and send them into the dungeons for some old-school treasure hunting and monster killing.



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Blood
Intense Violence
Strong Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Drugs

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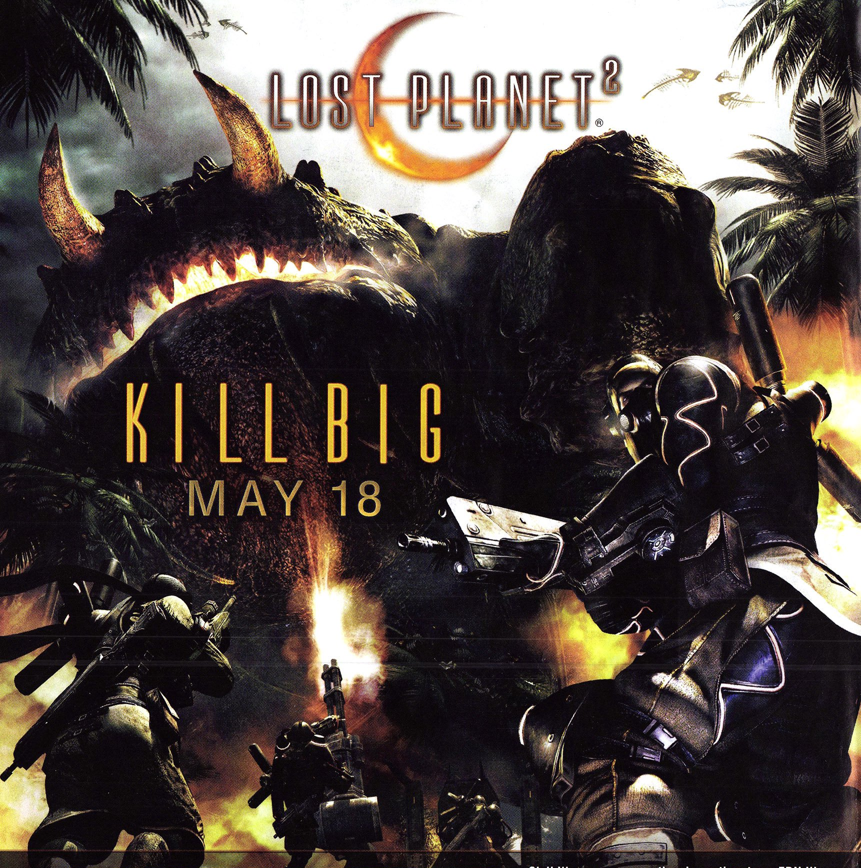

KILL BIG

MAY 18

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